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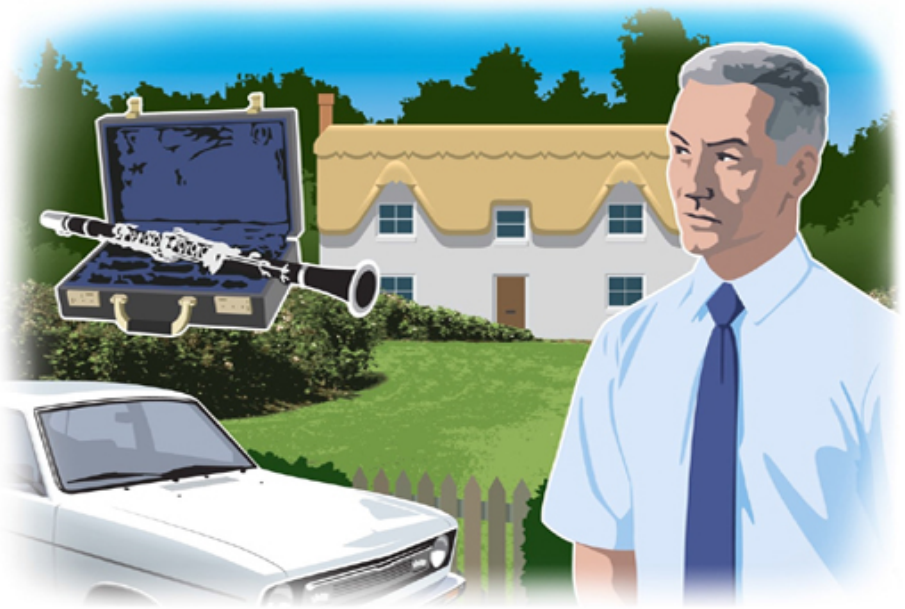

GENTLY INSTRUMENTAL

Alan Hunter

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Alan Hunter was born in Hoveton, Norfolk in 1922. He left school at the age of fourteen to work on his father's farm, spending his spare time sailing on the Norfolk Broads and writing nature notes for the *Eastern Evening News*. He also wrote poetry, some of which was published while he was in the RAF during the Second World War. By 1950, he was running his own bookshop in Norwich. In 1955, the first of what would become a series of forty-six George Gently novels was published. He died in 2005, aged eighty-two.

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Gently Instrumental

Alan Hunter

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CHAPTER ONE

SINCE MAY THERE had been no rain and now it was the twenty-fourth of August. Though a little haze had appeared that day it had done nothing to temper the glaring heat. A smoky wrack, it had driven over the sky to turn the sun into a baleful eye: a taunting spectre that half-hinted at some phenomenon forgotten. Then the sea breeze had stripped it away, the breeze that didn't cool the sun, didn't colour the bleached sky or refresh the sear trees. And the sea itself was tired. It barely whispered along the shingle-banks (there were no beaches on the coast beside which the small town lay): a grey, drained, uneasy plain, furrowed with waves too weary to break, it fretted at its edge the blunt pebbles which in storm it had heaped high. So long the sun had burned unchallenged! The bricks, the pantiles were never cool. Here and there streets, scarred by melting, had been roughly patched by council workmen. Hot in the air hung the smell of the bitumen, which shoes carried to floors and pavements; while the stalls of the fishermen, though scrubbed and rinsed, smelled strongly as one passed by. When would it change? When would the drought break? In heaths behind the town burned fires – bright-eyed flames, visible afar, with lazy columns of smoke by day. The world had lurched to produce such a summer. And now it was Tuesday, 24 August. The Festival banners hung limp in the streets, sagged by the sun and beckoning . . . whom? Though dusk had come, and one bright star, still heat like sickness sealed the town.

'Right then, people,' Walter Hozeley said. 'We'll have to take the Larghetto again.'

In the Music Room there was a faint stir, a clink as someone put down a glass. Yes . . . they *would* have to take it again! And it wasn't only the heat that was the problem. Though with both fans going and the windows wide . . . what would it be like in George V Hall?

'Henry – try to come in the *least bit* sooner . . . Laurel, my dear, a shade more brio . . . Tom, give it some colour in the dialogue passages . . . Leonard, you were about right.'

But that was just tinkering, and everyone knew it. The fault didn't lie with the Quartet. Playing together now for three seasons . . . five, if you didn't count Second Violin. Not the Quartet and not the heat: and you certainly couldn't fault Walter's score.

'And Terry, old lad . . .'

Terence Virtue hadn't picked up his instrument. Ebony and glinting silver, it lay on a cloth by his chair.

'So what about me?'

He must have known that all their eyes were on him. But what he was staring at was the open window, through which one glimpsed the darkening sea.

'Nothing special, old man! Only this is the place, where we want contrast . . . all

that lovely, lingering quality . . . the sensuous touch you do so well.'

'Are you saying I'm not doing it?'

'No, of course not! But we'll just run through to get it set . . . and *hang* on to those notes, Terry. They bring out the *instrument*. I could hear you playing them when I wrote it.'

And quickly he turned to the others, spreading his hands, so that they cocked their bows at the ready, and watching only from the corner of his eye for Virtue to take up the clarinet.

'All ready?'

He ducked head and hands. The muted strings came in together. Then the clarinet, just a breathing late, and so cutting short its first, key phrase. Would Hozeley halt them? He didn't. But there was a sick look in his eyes . . .

Dr Capel, First Violin, sighed through his prominent Grecian nose. He was aware of, on his left, Laurel Hazlewood's determined chin, and on his right the burly shoulders of Tom Friday, Viola. Then, beyond Laurel, the shadowed, neat face of Leonard Meares, bent over the cello, and centre, wearing tight slacks that accentuated his behind, the slender, swaggering figure of the clarinettist.

Goddamn sex, oh God damn it . . .

Because what these rehearsals had taught Capel had surprised him – not less than that Walter, old Walt Hozeley, Queen of the May, was a genius. Yes, a genius! How very surprising! It had perhaps occurred to nobody before Capel – that the old, grey-thatched aunty of Gorse Cottage was any more than a dilettante, a Festival cowboy.

In Shinglebourne, at least, he had no standing: just his smelly reputation. Virtue, he'd picked up at Eastbourne or somewhere, as one might pick up a tart. And yet, yet . . . in this *Festival Quintet* wasn't he matching himself with Mozart – hadn't he taken the *A Major Quintet* apart, to restate it in terms deliriously new?

Surely it would establish him: others must recognize it! That had been Capel's growing conviction. This year would go down as Hozeley's year, the year of the *Festival Quintet*. Shinglebourne had produced another genius in the grey-haired pederast of Gorse Cottage . . .

The cantilena ended, leaving clarinet and viola to pursue their dialogue with chords from Leonard. Fiddle under chin, Capel reached for a handkerchief to pat his broad, slanting forehead. He caught Laurel's eyes, round with meaning. Yes . . . that little squirt was still at it! Oh, he could play: no doubt about that . . . *if* he wanted to. There was the rub.

And Walt, he still had that sick expression on his craggy, droop-mouthed face, eyes suffering under heavy brows, his hands beseeching, willing Virtue. Oh Walt, you damned old fool! Why mix sodomy with music? Chase behinds, if that's your nature, but in the bowels of Christ, keep it separate . . .

The dialogue sank to its lush conclusion and the strings swept into their brilliant restatement. Virtue, freed, turned his back on Hozeley and once more stared out of the window. The bastard! It was deliberate sabotage . . . both of the *Quintet* and of Walt. What was the point of going on with the rehearsal . . . or Saturday's performance, if it came to that?

Yet he re-entered just on time, with a sneer on his delicately formed features, and for some moments in the coda played flawlessly, as, if he'd wished, he could have played throughout. A taunting glimpse of the real thing, the talent that Walt had seen in him – had nurtured and developed, and at last provided with a perfect vehicle.

Goddamn sex! Yet perhaps, without it, the *Festival Quintet* would never have been written.

Smooth, smooth, Walt's hands were saying, smooth to the exquisite ending, the seabird's note that fails in the fading surf of the strings . . .

The strings responded, soft, softer, with the ground-swell of the cello muting. The clarinet, on the other hand, blew a raucous 'Colonel Bogey'.

Walt's face had turned pale – good heavens, you could see the old woman in him! There, in his trembling thin lips and hurt eyes, tear-filling. And his body had drooped, lost its mannishness, might have been that of an ageing dowager, while his hands, at times so masterful, now quavered in their weakness.

'Terry!'

'What is it, Aunty?'

Virtue's brown eyes were like a weazel's, staring, steady: you felt he was judging you, passing sentence. Slim, dark, in a huge-collared shirt unbuttoned across a hairless chest, brown hands lightly clasping the clarinet, teeth white in a half-grin.

Yes . . . a handsome young animal – with a skater's behind.

'Terry . . . it's no good.'

'What are you on about, Aunty?'

'Terry, don't you understand? This is your chance, a chance that may never come again.'

'So what? I'm doing all right.'

'We can't carry on like this, Terry.'

'So how do you want to carry on . . . Aunty?'

At which point, Capel thought, I would certainly have hit him.

But Walt didn't hit him. The poor dolt was still infatuated, still thought the young devil would show him mercy. Oh dear! And Laurel, Miss Hazlewood, drinking it all in with wide eyes.

'Well, I've had enough, anyway.' This was Leonard, unwinding himself from the cello.

'Me too,' Tom Friday said. 'What I need is a ruddy great drink.'

'Then eff-off and get one,' Virtue sneered at him.

'Laddies, laddies!' Walt wailed.

'But what on earth is the use, Walter?' Leonard demanded. 'Can't you see this rehearsal is done for?'

'No, no.' Old Walt made an effort to become the hearty conductor again – his usual pose, and quite unconvincing: now it was well-nigh caricature. 'Terry doesn't mean anything, do you, Terry? This heat is getting us all down! Let's break for a smoke, people, and then we'll take a crack at the Allegretto.'

But nobody gave a sign of accepting the motion.

'*I* think we should have a showdown,' Leonard said. 'It's only three rehearsals to Saturday, with every seat in the hall sold.'

'Hear, hear,' Tom Friday said. 'And no squit about it being all right on the night. More like it'll be a ruddy fiasco, with young Lochinvar playing "Baker Street Rag".'

'You,' Virtue said, 'can jump in the sea.'

'I mean look at it this way,' Leonard said. 'If one of us wants to back out of the performance there may just be time to bring in an understudy.'

Virtue put down the clarinet. He took a step closer to Leonard. His narrow face

with its small mouth for a moment seemed all eyes.

'Are you looking for trouble?' he asked softly.

'Come on,' Tom Friday said. 'None of that.' Tom came of fisherman stock: he could have eaten Virtue twice before breakfast.

'I think that's your department,' Leonard said.

'I'm asking you,' Virtue said, just as softly.

'You're going to let Walt down, I can see that.'

'But I'm asking you. Are you looking for trouble?'

Leonard stared, his neat, handsome face suddenly violent with distaste. He, too, could have eaten Virtue, once at least. But he said nothing.

'Of course, Leonard's right!' Laurel burst out passionately. 'Oh, I'm sick of the whole thing! And it could have been so wonderful.' She turned impulsively to Virtue. 'Why – why do you want to ruin it?'

'Because he's built that way,' Tom Friday said. 'What about it, Walt? Do we get an understudy?'

Poor Walt fanned weakly with his hands, his mouth droopier than ever. But what could he say? Capel asked himself. Virtue had him in a deadlock. Goddamn sex . . . ! You couldn't cure it with any drug in the pharmacopoeia.

But now Virtue, with deft movements, was running a cloth over his instrument, whistling as he did so a further snatch of 'Colonel Bogey'. The polishing over, he laid the clarinet in its case, snapped shut the catches and reached for his jacket.

'That's that, then.'

'But . . . Terry!'

'Out of my way, you old tom-cat.'

'No, Terry! You can't do this. You know we can't get an understudy.'

'Ask Foxy Meares to help you out.'

'Terry, you know that's impossible. This is your part, yours alone. If you pull out we shall have to cancel.'

Virtue stood implacable, hands linked on the case's handle, jacket draped over an arm. His eyes, almost black, protruded slightly, causing Capel to wonder . . . epilepsy?

'So bloody cancel.'

'Terry!'

'Look, Walty, you can effing stuff it.'

'No, Terry, you're making too much of this . . .'

'Stuff it, I said. Effing stuff it.'

Walt's mouth hung. Suddenly there was poison exploding in the overwarm room. One felt the shock of it. Laurel's face had a hurt, horrified look. Tom Friday rose.

'Lay off that, Virtue.'

Virtue's eyes flickered to him briefly.

Walt's mouth was opening and closing. He gasped: 'Listen, Terry . . . please listen . . .'

'No – you listen.'

'Not here, Terry . . .'

'Bloody here and bloody now.'

'Terry . . .'

'Sod Terry! I've had Terry till I'm choked.'

'But . . .'

‘You’re out, Aunty.’

‘No, Terry!’

‘Wet up your kilt. I’m on my way.’

‘You can’t just—!’

‘Save it for Christmas. You’re back with the choirboys, Aunty Walt.’

Walt was a mess. His face had gone livid – there were areas of near-purple, Capel noted – and he was panting quickly. His pupils were small, the whites prominent, lids retracted.

‘Walt,’ Capel said. ‘Walt.’

Walt half-choked: ‘There’s . . . someone else!’

‘Wouldn’t you think so,’ Virtue jeered. ‘You dirty old queen, that’s just what you’d think.’

‘Terry . . . who?’

‘Never you mind.’

‘Terry, you must tell me who!’

‘Why should I tell you?’ He laughed tauntingly. ‘It could be someone in this room.’

‘In this room . . . ?’

‘Why not? Don’t think you’re the only tom-cat here! Or it could be one of those naughty little things’ – he rolled his eyes at the shrinking Laurel.

‘Right,’ Tom Friday said. ‘Out. Out, you dirty-minded scrubber.’

‘Oh sailor, how strong you are!’ Virtue sneered.

‘Out – or I’ll break your bloody neck!’

Virtue danced aside.

‘Please, no!’ Walt wailed.

‘Oh, I’m going,’ Virtue jeered. ‘Don’t get into bad company, Aunty Walt. And don’t wake me when you come in.’

‘Terry . . . Terry!’

‘Just stuff it.’

Virtue dodged round Tom Friday. He dumped the clarinet in Walt’s arms, blew him a mocking kiss, and went.

The door slammed. Walt sagged down on one of the Music Room’s stackable chairs. Tom Friday stood stroking his knuckles, as though they itched from blows unstruck. Laurel was trembling; Leonard looked pale. Capel all this time had nursed his violin. Now he rose, laid the violin on his chair and went to pat Walt’s shoulder.

‘Easy, old lad. You’re with friends.’

Walt groaned and covered his face. They could see his bowed shoulders heaving, hear him choke down a sob. A wretched sight! And this was the man who’d written the *Festival Quintet* . . .

‘Oh Mr Hozeley!’ Laurel cried. ‘I’m so sorry, so sorry!’

‘I should have thumped the little rat,’ Tom Friday muttered.

‘A pity we don’t still have the stocks,’ Leonard said savagely.

Walt shuddered; he snatched a great sigh and raised his head from his hands. He stared at them muzzily for a moment, his pale eyes a mist.

‘I can’t . . . I can’t go on now.’

‘Hush, Walt,’ Capel said. ‘We’ve lost our soloist, that’s all. That’s the way you have to look at it.’

‘I can’t, Henry. I wrote the part for him, I couldn’t bear to have someone else play it.’

‘Walt, the part is bigger than the player. You’ve got to give another man the chance.’

Walt gazed, then shook his head.

‘Yes,’ Capel urged. ‘You’ve *got* to, Walt. The *Quintet* is too important, it mustn’t be sacrificed to personal feelings. If necessary we can postpone it. There’s a vacant date at the end of the week. That’ll give us time. But you mustn’t call it off. This is something you owe to yourself. To music.’

‘It’s just another . . . festival piece.’

‘No, Walt.’

‘But Henry – I can’t take it!’

‘You’re upset, Walt. But you know I’m right.’

Walt jumped to his feet: went to stare at a window.

‘God’s bloody pyjamas,’ Tom Friday muttered. ‘I could strangle that snivelling Virtue! Do we know of an understudy?’

Capel touched his nose. ‘If only I can get Walt up to scratch.’

‘Walt’ll come round.’

‘Don’t be too certain. Virtue won’t let him off the hook.’

‘I’ll run that scrubber out of town!’

‘Only,’ Capel said, ‘it wouldn’t cure Walt.’

They stared at Hozeley’s hunched back. In Laurel’s eyes there were tears. Leonard’s face was still pale, had a set, empty expression.

Walt came back.

‘I can’t go home tonight.’ His heavy features were all misery.

‘That’s all right, Walt,’ Capel said hastily. ‘There’s always a bed for you at my place.’

‘I need to think . . . and it’s so hot. I’ll go for a walk along the Front . . . where I can hear the sea. I need some coolness in my brain.’

Clumsily, he picked up his jacket, set his wide-brimmed hat on his locks. Then he shambled out: sixty-one, admitting to eighty when crossed in love.

‘Go after him, Henry!’ Tom Friday exclaimed. ‘The poor old sod is acting desperate.’

Slowly Capel shook his head. ‘Not Walt. He’s a survivor.’

‘You could talk to him.’

‘I’ll talk to him later. Right now he’s best left alone. When he comes in I’ll give him a sedative and a little tot. Tomorrow we’ll talk.’

‘Oh, poor Mr Hozeley!’ Laurel cried. ‘I wish there was some way we could help him.’

Capel gave her a meditative glance, then moved his angular shoulders. ‘Let’s go for a drink.’

‘Not me,’ Leonard said. ‘I’m like Walt. I need air.’ He moved abruptly to his cello and laid it away in its case. ‘I’ll leave this here – on chance.’

‘Yes, do that,’ Capel nodded.

‘I think I’ll go with Leonard,’ Laurel said. ‘Really, it’s too hot for drinking.’

So then they were two, Capel and Tom Friday, standing together in the silent room: with the chairs grouped emptily on the low platform, the evening’s music dead and buried.

‘Tom,’ Capel said. ‘Isn’t sex a bastard. It does for men like drink. It sets them up but it knocks them down. It’s like a fire you can’t control.’

‘Sex is all right,’ Tom Friday said. ‘As long as you don’t have it on the brain.’

‘Walt has it on the brain,’ Capel said. ‘He’s sick with it.’

‘So,’ Tom Friday said, ‘what can we do?’

This, in the Music Room of The White Hart, at the top end of the small town, where it verged into country, when the night of 24 August was beginning. The world turned. Sidelong light flickered across the grey plains of sea. From shadow stepped the houses, the tinder trees, the blackened heaths. Early men walked. In street and road and lane they went their way: gate to gate, house to house, with little clatterings and clinkings. Then one stopped and stood still, stopped between the dawn light and the sun: stopped, in a great silence that strangled song in the birds’ throats. Cruelly the sun came out of Holland on the morning of the twenty-fifth, sharp as a broken bottle. Cars arrived, other men.

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT THE OFFICE smelled of was soot, like a railway waiting room of earlier days. And in fact there was a shuttered-off fireplace, painted over but not otherwise effaced. Inspector Leyston went with the room: a tall, lean man, nearing retirement, dressed in a dark suit and waistcoat and sporting a pair of well-combed sideboards. In shaking hands, he touched his heels together.

'Didn't expect them to send us one of the brass, sir.'

Gently grinned. 'There's a reason for it. Our Assistant Commissioner is a culture vulture.'

Then, to Leyston's surprise, Gently rounded his lips and began to whistle: a haunting little theme. And Gently had a twinkle in his eye.

'Recognize it?'

'Well . . . no, sir.'

'It's from Hozeley's *Beach Suite*. They gave it on the Proms last summer, and our AC is something of an addict. Also, it's been taped by the LSO. Your Walter Hozeley is a Name.'

'Yes . . . I see, sir.'

Gently sent him an amused look. 'Got any beer?'

'You bet, sir.'

'It was hot work, driving down.'

Leyston set up bottles and glasses – old-fashioned tumblers, heavy and fluted. Through the office window one looked down on a street which the sun was pounding like a hammer. Slung across it was a canvas banner: Shinglebourne's 27th Festival of Music and Art, 28 Aug–6 Sept It hung unstirred by any breeze.

'Let me guess why you called us in. There's too many toes here to tread on.'

Gently had gulped down half a tumbler before Leyston had finished his first sip. Another contrast: he was wearing sandals, a short-sleeved shirt and calf-length slacks, from the hip-pocket of which his wallet bulged. All of which Leyston had eyed almost guiltily.

'Well . . . I have to admit that, sir.'

'There'll be some who are too close for comfort.'

'Yes, sir. One or two.' Leyston took a nervous swig. 'I mean, Dr Capel, sir. He's my doctor. It'd be a bit awkward to have a go at him. And Mr Meares manages the building society office where I took out the mortgage for my house. Then there's Friday, he's the boatbuilder, he looks after my old yacht. Miss Hazlewood I don't know personally, but her old man is the town clerk.'

Gently drank. 'And you fancy the whole bunch?'

'Just Hozeley, sir. But the others are involved.'

'Very awkward,' Gently said. 'My Assistant Commissioner doesn't see Hozeley in the part at all.'

He drank; Leyston drank. It was what that summer was all about. Though by now the sun was off the office window, still it seemed to pulse through the walls, the ceiling.

'What do you know about Virtue?'

Leyston's face was long between its sideboards. 'He doesn't have form, sir. Came here from Eastbourne. Been living with Hozeley for six months.'

'I can add a bit to that.' From his briefcase Gently hoisted a limp folder. 'Born at Streatham. Two years ago he was selling cars at a Streatham garage, run by the Parry brothers, Frank and Arthur, who copped three apiece for ringing cars.' He spread photographs on the desk. 'Full remission. They've been back in circulation for a month. Virtue shopped them. Dodgy alibis. It's an idea that appeals to the AC.'

Leyston gazed doubtfully, then shook his head. 'Haven't twigged them up this way, sir.'

'Probably a coincidence,' Gently said. 'But we'll leave it on the table. Next we hear of Virtue at Eastbourne. He was employed as a waiter at the Rampton Court Hotel. Occasional stand-in with the orchestra, which no doubt was how he came to Hozeley's notice. Tried to blackmail a guest, who reported it. Virtue sheered off, no charge. Ring any bells?'

'Not with me, sir.'

Gently sighed and gulped more beer. 'We'll stick with Hozeley then, for the present. Now I'll take a look at your pictures.'

Leyston handed him a file. A spread of glossies showed the body lying on its back, legs crumpled to the side, arms upflung and head turned to the left. The clothes were trendy: candy-striped shirt, skin-tight slacks and close-waisted jacket. A brushed hairstyle framed delicate features. Lying near the head, a large flint.

'Was the body frisked?'

'No sir. Cash and possessions intact.'

'I don't see a watch.'

'He wasn't wearing it. We found a Timex watch in a drawer of his dressing table.'

'How much cash?'

'Three fivers and change. Hozeley says he gave him twenty the day before.'

'Robbery no motive, then.'

Leyston shrugged; as though perhaps it hadn't even crossed his mind.

'Now the medical bit.'

'Depressed fracture of the skull, sir, on the left side of the head. Bruising on knuckles of both hands. Bruising on left buttock.'

Gently pondered. 'It sounds like a fight. But how did he bruise his left buttock?'

'Might have done it when he fell,' Leyston suggested. 'The knuckles too, the way he's lying.'

'Was Hozeley examined?'

'Yes sir. Negative.'

'I think Virtue defended himself.'

'He might not have done any damage,' Leyston said. 'I reckon he was taken out pretty damn quick.'

'How active is Hozeley?'

Leyston pursed his lips. 'He'd do all right with that flint in his hand.'

'What's the report on the flint?'

'Well, negative. But lab says they wouldn't expect it to pick up much.'

Gently emptied his bottle and drank. Clearly, Leyston was selling himself Hozeley. Perhaps that wasn't surprising, when the mores of Shinglebourne were so far removed from the mores of, say, Chelsea. Yet already the case was showing holes through which an astute counsel could drive a truck.

'What's Hozeley's story?'

'What you might expect, sir. He says he went for a stroll on the Front. Says the row with Virtue upset him, that he couldn't face going back to the cottage. Dr Capel had offered to put him up, but he didn't arrive there till two hours later. Says he sat on the shingle for a bit, didn't realize how long he'd been there.'

'Any corroboration offered?'

'No sir.'

'Is it likely that nobody would have seen him?'

'Well, it was dark,' Leyston said. 'But he's pretty well known, and we've talked to one or two people who were about there.'

'Can you place him at the cottage?'

'Not exactly, though we do have a couple of likely statements. About a man seen hurrying along Saxton Road at around 9.20 p.m., which would have been the time.'

'But no identification.'

'Afraid not, sir. Neither witness got a proper look at him.'

Gently tapped on the desk. 'Getting back to that rehearsal! What's your impression of what happened there?'

'I've got the statements, sir . . .'

'Never mind those. I want you to give me your idea.'

Leyston glanced at the window for a moment, his solemn face blank. He fingered the corner of a sideboard. 'I'd say . . . it was a sort of lovers' quarrel, sir.'

'Go on.'

'Well, that's how it reads. There was this mention of another man. They say that Virtue was hinting at it, telling Hozeley that he was through with him. Of course, Virtue was playing up as well, trying to wreck the performance on Saturday. Some of the others were rowing with him. But it was really between him and Hozeley.'

'It began with him playing badly.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Which of the others were rowing with him?'

'Mr Meares and Mr Friday. They were wanting Hozeley to throw him out. But of course he wouldn't, sir, he was too stuck on him. And then Virtue decided to take off. That was when he really let go at Hozeley and when this other man was talked of.'

'Any names mentioned?'

'No, sir. And I haven't turned up a likely customer.'

'There's no question that Hozeley was seriously disturbed?'

Leyston shook his head. 'No question at all, sir. When he went off he was in such a state that they thought someone ought to go with him. He was acting crazed. And this was only five minutes after Virtue left.'

'When did the others leave?'

'Mr Meares and Miss Hazlewood left together soon after Hozeley. Dr Capel and Mr Friday had a drink in the bar, then they left together at around 10 p.m. Hozeley didn't arrive at the doctor's until nearly half-past eleven. The doctor says he gave him a sedative and packed him off to bed.'

Gently nodded. 'And the ETD?'

‘Between nine and midnight,’ Leyston said. ‘The pathologist wouldn’t put it closer. Seems this heat plays tricks with bodies.’

‘He died where found.’

‘Yes, sir. By the gateway of Gorse Cottage.’

‘Right,’ Gently said, rising. ‘Now I think I’m ready to meet the bereaved and the damned.’

They went down to Gently’s white Marina, which stood frying in the sun. Shinglebourne’s main street ran north and south and offered little shade at mid-morning. It was a broad, unusual street, developed in a piece by some mid-Victorian: a double run of small shops and houses that alternated brick fret with voluptuous plaster. A lesser street ran parallel with it, and then the undistinguished Front. All was coeval, on a minor scale, and disturbingly poised between quaint and ugly.

Gently unlocked the car and they paused to let its plastic breath exhale. Leyston, encouraged by example, had removed his jacket, to look even more in period in waistcoat and shirtsleeves. They drove up The Street. No later developments interrupted the dogged Victorian scene. At its top The Street was closed by a red-brick block that squeezed the traffic into narrow thoroughfares.

‘Where is the White Hart?’ Gently asked.

‘At the north end, sir,’ Leyston said. ‘Near the Saxton Road junction. You wouldn’t have passed it, driving in.’

‘When was it built?’

Leyston looked vague. ‘Don’t reckon it’s a new place, sir. But it’s a three-star. All the important music people stay there.’

They turned into Saxton Road. Here at last the Victorian clef faltered. After passing a large but insipid flint church one began to see cheerful Edwardian houses. They peered from behind beeches and parched lawns and drives that led to multiple garages. Saxton Road, Shinglebourne’s link with England, was also the preserve of its affluent. Higher up still the houses were modern; they ended at the golf course and the open heath.

‘On your left, sir.’

Where the houses stopped a lane turned down between hawthorn hedges. It was surfaced with gravel, and within a hundred yards reached a wide, low gate. Behind the gate stood a thatched cottage, partly concealed by thick shrubberies; because it lay lower than the road, one could glimpse the heath lying all around it.

‘Gorse Cottage . . . ?’

‘That’s it, sir.’

Gently drove down and parked by the gate. The cottage was large; it had gable-fronted wings and dormer windows tucked under its thatch. The walls were faced with white plaster and the thatch was reed, crisp and new. Before the cottage a weedless sweep encircled a trim bed of roses.

‘Hozeley can’t be poor,’ Gently murmured.

‘He’s all right, sir,’ Leyston said. ‘Old Mrs Suffling used to own this place. She was his aunt, she left it to him.’

‘No question about the way she went?’

‘Well . . . no, sir!’ Leyston looked alarmed.

Gently shrugged; he got out of the car. ‘Now . . . let’s see the spot where you found him.’

Leyston stood by the varnished gate and traced an outline with his foot. Virtue had fallen just short of the gateway, with his head pointing towards the right-hand post. A little blood which had oozed from the head had later been tidied away, and the embedded gravel had taken no marks. Of the tragedy, nothing remained.

'What about the flint?'

'It was holding the gate, sir. Hozeley left the gate open when he drove out.'

Leyston demonstrated how the gate, when opened, would swing slowly shut unless stopped. And of course it had been dark, or nearly so, when the attack had taken place: the assailant must have known of the flint's being there, and Hozeley knew: QED.

'Still only presumption, Gently said.'

'Oh, I don't know, sir,' Leyston said. 'It was Hozeley who put the flint there only a couple of hours earlier. So he chases back here, catches Virtue, and Virtue provokes him to violence. Then he drops his hand on the flint. I reckon that's as near as we'll get to it, sir.'

They were interrupted. From an open window came a frantic outburst of piano-playing, a demented hammering. Someone was batting out the Dead March from *Saul*.

Leyston rang; the playing stopped. Firm footsteps approached the door. It was opened by a white-haired matron who glared at Leyston, and then retired. Leyston looked hot.

'Mrs Butley,' he muttered. 'I reckon she went with the cottage, sir.'

'Does she live in?'

'No, sir. She's got a little place by the vicarage.'

The lady returned. She led them down the hall and threw open a heavy panelled door. It admitted them to a large room that spanned the entire width of the ground floor. Its ceiling was low and beamed and its windows set deep in massive walls; at the far end a man was sitting at a walnut-cased Steinway grand.

'The policemen, sir,' Mrs Butley said bleakly.

Walter Hozeley rose from the grand. He was a large, deep-shouldered man with a head of untidy, grey hair. He had heavy, brooding features and a big, coppery nose, feathery brows, a mouth that drooped and absent, pale blue eyes. He hesitated, then gestured.

'Thank you, Butty. You may go.'

The voice was clipped and neutral. It seemed to come from a long way off. Leyston stepped forward.

'Chief Superintendent Gently, sir. He's in charge of the case now. He'd like to ask you a few questions, sir – just to get things clear in his mind.'

Hozeley peered at Gently. 'From Scotland Yard?'

'Yes, sir. From the Yard.'

'Hasn't he read my statement?'

'Well yes, sir, but—'

'I don't have anything more to add.'

He stalked to a wing-armchair and sat, his craggy profile turned to a window: Walt, Walter Hozeley, whose large brain had heard the *Beach Suite*.

Gently hunched. He strolled across to the piano. He began pressing notes with unskilled fingers. It was that theme again, Leyston noticed, at first picked out

haltingly, then with more confidence. And at last Gently got it together, was making note follow note in tempo. He played it lingeringly, sensitively, searching for the feeling. Hozeley jumped up.

'*Not* like that!'

He stormed over to the piano stool. His large hands spread over the keyboard and for an instant were quite still. Then they struck. From another world the theme came tumbling in a poised rhapsody, an electrifying fabric which the hands seemed to conduct rather than play. They stilled again. 'Thus.'

'But I don't play,' Gently admitted.

'You don't listen,' Hozeley retorted. 'You haven't heard it. Perhaps you never will.'

'Could Virtue hear it?' Gently said.

Hozeley glared for a space at the keyboard. He raised and let fall his hands, but without striking a note. 'Yes.'

'Virtue really had talent?'

'Yes.'

'He just lacked the discipline to go with it.'

'When he wished he had it.'

'But is that good enough?'

Hozeley said nothing and his hands stayed still.

'I think Virtue was a failure,' Gently said. 'He didn't have the character to be an artist. You tried to give it to him but you couldn't. He belonged where you found him – in someone's Palm Court.'

'That is unfair!'

Gently grunted. 'We know a bit about him, too.'

'If I could have kept him long enough—'

'But that's the point, isn't it? He would never have stayed with you until then.'

Hozeley pressed hard on the edge of the keyboard. 'Terry had his failings and I wasn't blind to them. First they had to be overcome, and that was a task that called for patience. But Terry was worth it. He had a wonderful ear and his fingering was quite exceptional. Those are two things that rarely come together. I couldn't let him throw such potential away.'

'But by Tuesday you knew it was useless.'

'What happened on Tuesday was just one more hurdle.'

Gently shook his head. 'Tuesday was the end. You knew that Virtue was a dud, that you were going to lose him.'

Hozeley slammed a chord. 'I deny that.'

Gently shrugged. He turned away into the room.

★ ★ ★

It was a cool room: between it and the sun lay eighteen inches of fragrant thatch. Also it smelled of potpourri and another scent, less easy to identify. Gently prowled around it. The potpourri was contained in two Chinese jars on a teak stand. The keener odour he traced to a deeply carved camphor-wood chest. Then there was other Chinese bric-a-brac and a Chinese carpet, the colour of jade. The furniture however was conventional, with loose covers of flowered cretonne.

Hozeley had begun to play again: Chopin that sounded like tears. Leyston stood by with a gloomy expression – no doubt he preferred the hard-shooting game. Gently

came back to the piano.

'Tell me about Tuesday.'

Hozeley didn't stop playing. 'I gave the Inspector an exhaustive statement.'

'Not the air. The orchestration.'

Hozeley played the Chopin to a close. 'Terry was . . . fretting.'

'Go on.'

'The young are restless – impatient. Terry was a London boy. Of course, he would find Shinglebourne dull.'

'Had there been other rows?'

Hozeley struck a note. 'Terry would have liked me to have given him money. A substantial sum, I mean. Naturally, I saw he had pocket money.'

'Did he ever threaten you?'

'He could be excitable, saying things he didn't mean.'

'He had a record of attempted blackmail.'

Hozeley played softly a succession of melodic phrases. 'I promised him a holiday after the Festival. A fortnight's touring in France.'

'What was his response?'

'He spoke wildly, pretended I was trying to keep him a prisoner.'

'And were you?'

Hozeley played a phrase. 'To him, I may have seemed repressive. But it was necessary. He was too susceptible. I had to protect his developing talent.'

'But he was . . . susceptible.'

'I said so.'

'That was the true cause of the friction?'

Hozeley shrugged. 'Yes.'

'Whom did you suspect?'

Hozeley played.

'Can we put it this way,' Gently said. 'What happened at the rehearsal was no surprise. You were expecting a crisis. Perhaps Virtue had told you his intentions in so many words.'

Hozeley struck a chord harshly. 'No.'

'You had no idea he was planning to break with you?'

'He was . . . too much of an artist.'

'How?'

'The *Quintet* was written to provide him with a vehicle.'

'And that would influence him?'

'Yes.' Hozeley ruffled a trill and closed it. 'The *Quintet* was to launch him as a soloist before the top national critics. Terry wanted that. You assess him as a failure, but after the *Quintet* he would have arrived. It would have stiffened his character, given him reputation. He wanted that beyond anything.'

'Yet he ruined the rehearsal?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'To humiliate me, I think.'

'Only that . . . ?'

Hozeley played some stabbing notes. 'That was the weak side of Terry's character.'

'And it came out of the blue.'

His head bowed. ‘I didn’t think he would hazard his great chance. And I still don’t believe he meant it, that he wouldn’t have come round later.’

‘But the other man . . . ?’

‘He didn’t exist. That was simply Terry trying to hurt me.’

Hozeley leaned over the keyboard and played a long, sonorous passage, a complete statement. When it ended he sat back, breathing faster.

‘Yet you must have thought differently . . . at the time.’

Gently had strayed to one of the windows. Beyond a lawn and flower beds one could see a summerhouse, fruit trees, a kitchen garden and an old brick wall. Further still was the distance of marshes and the southward gleam of a river. Down the garden a sunbrowned youngster was hoeing, his denim jacket hanging from a spade.

‘I admit that I was shocked.’

‘You were bowled over. You couldn’t face coming back here that night. I suggest that you did believe in the existence of the other man. What other motive could there have been for Virtue’s behaviour?’

Behind him Hozeley played a note. ‘My humiliation.’

‘But why?’

Hozeley played.

‘Yes – you believed it,’ Gently said. ‘That he was casting you off for a rival. Your honeymoon with him was over, his ambition wasn’t strong enough to hold him. Virtue was a mistake. In your infatuation you had taken him for what he wasn’t. And Tuesday’s rehearsal brought it home to you – all Virtue wanted from you was money.’

‘No.’ A sudden discord.

‘Wasn’t that why you were so upset? Now, you’d like to hide your head in the sand, but then – for that moment – you were staring at the truth.’

‘It wasn’t the truth.’

‘What was, then?’

Fingers dragged across the keyboard.

‘That was the truth you had in your mind when you left the rehearsal, so soon after Virtue.’

‘I was – shocked.’

‘Shocked and humiliated.’

‘Yes . . . I needed time to think.’

‘To think how to settle up with Virtue.’

Hozeley struck some clashing chords.

‘Listen . . . please! All you are saying was certainly going through my mind. He had been so brutal that I had to think it, he made certain that I would. But I knew something that you can’t know. I knew that Terry’s talent was real. Infatuation couldn’t blind me to that – the talent was there. And it would have prevailed.’

‘So the row was mere artistic temperament?’

‘No – I’m not saying that! But it wasn’t final, and perhaps if I’d gone after him I could have found out the reason. But I didn’t, I was too upset, I simply had to be alone. Only this I insist on: Terry’s behaviour was false. And now we can never know why he did it.’

‘Do you honestly think we can accept that?’

Hozeley played stabbing notes.

‘You must know what we’re thinking. The killer was a man with motive,

opportunity and knowledge of where to put his hand on the weapon. Who could that be?'

Hozeley played.

'Don't you realize you're close to being arrested?'

The playing stopped. Gently turned. Hozeley's hands were burrowing in his hair.

'Well?'

'You *must* understand! I could never have offered Terry violence.'

'Because you loved him?'

Hozeley groaned. 'Because of his talent. It was real.'

Leyston jiffled; his opinion was written large on his mournful face. He'd done his homework, and Hozeley was vulnerable; they had all they needed to take him in. Yet Gently was hesitating – perhaps under orders to bend the rules for the old queen . . .

Now he came back to the piano.

'Play me a passage from the new *Quintet*.'

'But that has no bearing—'

'The clarinet part. Something to illustrate the scope of the instrument.'

Hozeley's fingers combed his locks; then he straightened himself and played. Liquid trills of rapid notes chased each other through several octaves. They combined to shape a melody, never quite seeming complete, until surprisingly, with one subdued note, the pattern was made.

The resonance died. Gently, straight-faced, took a slow turn through the room, the room so cool and quiet under the fathoms of its thatch. At the French doors he paused.

'Was your gardener here on Tuesday?'

'David . . . ? No.'

'Call him.'

Sweating, the youngster came to the door. His name was Crag; he had limp fair hair and rustic good looks, scorched by sun. But he had nothing to offer, Leyston knew, and he was alibied for Tuesday by his grandfather . . .

But still Gently hesitated, pondered, went to stare at fresh objects: books, pictures, kakemonos, a dusty violin that lay on a shelf. Hozeley, who'd risen to call Crag, had seated himself again. Out in the hall a clock chimed . . . did it take so long to make up one's mind?

'Very well.'

Hozeley stood up. 'Are you taking me into custody?'

'Not yet.'

Behind his back, Leyston's hands grappled tight.

'I would prefer to get it over.'

'First, we have other inquiries to make. But I must ask you to hold yourself available. You are not to leave Shinglebourne.'

And Leyston knew, then: knew that someone had bought and sold him; knew that the old boy network was operating to get Hozeley off the hook. He said nothing, looked nothing as they returned to the sizzling Marina. An incandescent door handle burned his hand and the plastic seat well-nigh skinned him.

CHAPTER THREE

GENTLY TINKERED THE car back down Saxton Road and found a part-shaded pitch with a view of the Front. The Front was narrow and a little crooked, being squeezed between seaside villas and shingle. Fish smells drifted through the Marina's windows from stalls on the shady side of huts; gulls wheeled and trotted in the offing, bathers came and went over the shingle. But what dominated the Front was the royal blue hull and white coamings and bilges of the town's lifeboat, which reared high over the shingle banks as though caught in a plunge towards the sea and Holland.

'This is the way Hozeley would have come.'

'The way he says he did,' Leyston prompted.

Across a small plain where cars were parked rose the bland front of The White Hart hotel. Its style was Regency, but a marked rigidity in the details gave it away; the recession of the windows was too emphatic, the ornate plasterwork mechanical and glib. Before it, and equally suspect, stood Shinglebourne's gift to postcard publishers: the Moot House, a Tudor fantasy that might well have had origins in a jotting of Ruskin's.

'Which is the Music Room?'

'The bit that's added on, sir. There's a separate entrance round the corner.'

'With access to the hotel?'

'Yes, sir. But along a corridor from the public rooms.' Gently brooded over the scene. From that corner the distracted figure would have stumbled; across the plain, around the Moot House and up steps to the shingle. The pubs hadn't turned out, cars waited unattended, scanty street lights threw long shadows . . . the clash and crunch of his feet in the shingle would merge with the faint hoarseness of the surf. He'd have been a shadow, his identity uncertain, vanishing quickly over the banks. From the Front, you couldn't see the tideline. An army of Hozeleys might have squatted there.

'His statement is credible.'

'Up to a point, sir.' Leyston sounded less than convinced. Plainly the interview with Hozeley hadn't changed the local man's mind.

'What's your thinking, then?'

'Well – this, sir. You've fitted him up with a better motive.'

'You mean the money?'

'Exactly, sir. I'd say that Virtue had him over a barrel.'

Gently grunted and felt for his pipe: a seasoned weapon with a bent stem. Leyston watched impatiently while he filled it from a yellow tin.

'Spell it out for me.'

'I see it like this, sir. That performance was only four nights away. I don't reckon Hozeley could have found an understudy for a solo part in that time. So he was screwed. Unless he coughed up, there wasn't going to be a performance.'

'You don't go much on Virtue's artistic integrity.'

‘That’s a lot of hot air, sir, between you and me. We’ve met chummies like Virtue before. They don’t let that sort of thing stand in their way.’

‘But if Hozeley believed it?’

‘You’ve only his word, sir. I’ll bet he wasn’t pinning much on it on Tuesday. And then there was this jealousy bit thrown in, just to put on a bit more pressure.’

Gently lit and puffed. ‘We can’t overlook this: that Hozeley would recognize talent when he saw it. He’s a man who’s mixed with it, understands it, is in some way an authority. And he’s saying Virtue wouldn’t have thrown the performance, that his threat didn’t ring true.’

‘That’s what he would say, sir.’

‘You don’t accept it?’

‘With all due respect, sir, it sounds like a con.’

‘But suppose it was true?’

Leyston stared at the lifeboat: man of sternness, who’d heard it all before.

‘Sir, I reckon it adds up to this, how far we bend over backwards for Hozeley. He can talk, sir, I’ll give him that, and he’d be a tricky man in the box. But I don’t buy it. We’ve too much on him, and there’s no one else in the picture. If you don’t mind, sir, I’d like to go back there and have him amend his statement.’

Gently breathed smoke. ‘No harm in that.’

‘But I’d sooner we took him in, sir.’

More smoke, curling greyly in the torrid air.

‘No.’

He drove Leyston to the police station and, over a beer, leafed through the statements. Then he climbed back into the Marina and set it drifting again through the heat. Opposite the church a gateless entry offered parking in the shade of beeches along with the prospect of a red-brick house with impressive bays and interesting roofs. Gently drove in. A red Volvo Estate and a blue Rover 2000 stood on the gravel, the former dusty and ticketed: doctor, the latter freshly washed and leathered. He parked and got out. An elderly man who’d been raking the gravel paused to stare.

‘You want the doctor?’

‘Police.’

The man polished sweat from his forehead.

‘Like that you won’t need an appointment, will you?’

‘Where shall I find him?’

‘Try the surgery.’

But his eyes were curious, holding Gently’s, and his mouth gaped for a moment. He ducked and went on with his raking, sweat bathing a bald crown.

The surgery was an annex. Though a green door one entered a bright, polished room, furnished with padded chairs and with a table strewn with magazines. At one end a window was signed: Reception. Gently approached it. A girl appeared.

‘Yes . . . ?’

She too had her spell of hesitation: a honey blonde of not more than twenty, with smooth features and firm eyes.

‘Is it about Terry Virtue?’

‘Did you know him?’

‘No, of course not!’ She flushed. ‘I’ll see if the doctor’s free.’

‘Just take me to him, please.’

She hastened ahead of him along a glassed passage where cacti ranged on metal shelves, rapped on a panelled door and, without waiting, pushed her head round it.

'Sir . . .' A low mumble was answered at once with a terse word. Haughtily, she withdrew her head again to announce:

'The doctor will see you.'

The man who rose from behind the desk was probably an inch taller than Gently, but he was lean, large-boned and angular, with a lean, angular face. He was about fifty. He had straight, grey hair sleeked back from a slanting forehead, a nose as straight as a rule and a long jaw and protrusive chin. His eyes were blue-grey. He smiled as he rose, the eyes flickering amusement. He put out a bony hand with a grip that left Gently's numbed.

'Henry Capel. I know who you are.'

'Oh . . . ?'

'Old Walt has been on the phone. He's still sleeping here, you know. I thought it wisest to hang on to him. What do you think?'

'I think it's wise.'

'Yes, the old lad has taken a knock. I keep him under mild sedation, naturally – just enough to blur the edges.'

He let go of Gently's hand, still smiling, and folded himself back on his chair. Despite the grey hair he had a strange air of youthfulness, of being somebody's big brother. Yet his dress was formal. It included the monogrammed tie of a yacht club.

'You'll be a sailing man, then . . . ?'

'Oh yes – we all are here. Raised on Arthur Ransome and Uffa . . . that's my little ship, hanging on the wall. Called *Yin*.' His eyes rested on Gently's.

Gently twitched a shoulder. 'The female principle.'

'Ah.' Capel nodded. 'I see I'm dealing with rather more than a plain copper. But sailing's as much in the family as music. My son and my wife are both sailors. And Tom, our Viola, owns the boatyard – that's his daughter out there. Marion.'

'I see . . . all in the family.'

Capel's laugh was tickled. 'Yes, Leslie does have an eye for Marion. But he's at Guy's, you know. Second year.'

'And Mr Hozeley – does he sail?'

'Walt? Never. He prefers to watch.'

'To listen to the cadence.'

'Aha. You obviously know something about his music.'

Capel hummed a jaunty air, his fingers dancing on the desk; then he sighed regretfully.

'But you haven't come here about his music.'

'I'm ready to talk about it.'

'No doubt. But what you've come about is the man.' He tilted his odd face. 'Leyston wants to nail Walt,' he said. 'That's preposterous, but it's true. And somehow, we've got to stop him.'

'We?' Gently said.

Capel's eyes were quick. 'Have you talked to Walt?'

'Yes.'

'Then what's your opinion?'

Gently jogged his shoulders. 'I'd sooner hear yours.'

Capel gazed at him, grey eyes probing. ‘My opinion and yours are the same,’ he said. ‘Walt’s a pederast, he’s a genius and he’s quite incapable of hurting anyone.’

‘Is that my opinion?’

‘Yes.’

He rose and took some steps down the room.

‘What music of Walt’s do you know?’ he asked.

Gently took a seat on the corner of the desk. It was a large room with tall windows: almost as idiosyncratic as its owner. Between bookcases of natural oak hung row on row of framed photographs, each depicting a prehistoric stone circle, or occasionally a single stone. A metal-framed cabinet contained clinical clutter, a display-table pebbles and shells. Then there was the half-model of Lapel’s sloop, mounted on teak and hung over the desk.

‘I know the *Beach Suite*. I have the tape.’

‘Yes, the *Beach Suite*,’ Capel said. ‘That was the start of things for Walt. Before that nobody had ever heard of him.’ He made a gliding movement. ‘I don’t have to remind you that Shinglebourne had its presiding genius. Till now, Walt has been in the shadow of greatness, we couldn’t see him. The *Beach Suite* changed that.’

‘Your presiding genius promoted him.’

‘Yes. He got him a spot on the Proms. But even then’ – Capel hoisted his shoulders – ‘I have to admit to being one of the blind. Old Walt is so modest. And the *Suite* was so new – new in a technical sense, I mean. Genius is rum. You need time to mature to it, to let it modify your responses. It wasn’t until we started rehearsing the *Quintet* that I realized where we were. But I knew then. You can’t play Walt and be oblivious of his quality.’

Gently nodded. ‘A second Shinglebourne Orpheus.’

‘Oh, you can’t compare genius. You must just be thankful for it.’

‘And perhaps . . . protect it?’

Capel’s glance was sharp. ‘Yes. Why not?’

Gently hunched. ‘Let’s get to Virtue! What’s your opinion of him?’

‘Virtue.’ Capel gestured. ‘Virtue was a predator, the type that preys on people like Walt. A predatory egoist. You had to be dazzled by sex not to see it. Believe me, Freud was no fool when he placed such emphasis on sex. It’s the underground spring that flows every moment and tends to burst out at the smallest obstruction. It’s sex that roughhews our ends, rationalize them how we may. Walt’s stream had taken the alternative channel. Which left him vulnerable to Virtue, but inspired the *Quintet*.’

‘And Virtue’s stream?’

‘Virtue was debased. He was a promiscuous bisexual.’

‘Can you be certain of that?’

‘Quite certain. He merely preyed on men because it was easier.’

‘So there could be a woman in it somewhere?’

Capel pulled a face. ‘It’s always possible. Though I have to admit that I think it’s unlikely. Laurel, our Second Violin, loathed him.’

‘I imagine Hozeley would keep a tight rein on him.’

‘Oh, yes. Your old queens are more jealous than women. If Virtue was up to something on the side he would need to have been very clever.’

‘Yet wasn’t that the inference?’

Capel hesitated. ‘Old Walt thinks otherwise, you know. And with all due

allowance for his infatuation, I must cautiously agree with him. Virtue's insinuations weren't specific. They sounded rather off the cuff. He wanted to hurt Walt. It had been building all the evening, till at last he let fly with the unforgivable.'

'But . . . why?'

Capel mimed blankness. 'Perhaps Walt had simply got on his nerves.'

'But – if Virtue was the predator you suppose – wouldn't he have been too cunning for such tactics?'

Capel shook his head and was silent.

'What I'm getting at is this,' Gently said. 'If the break-up was final, as your statement suggests, then there must be another man in the picture. Hozeley, of course, would deny that. But so apparently do you.'

'Oh come now,' Capel smiled. 'Cautious agreement was all I said. And if there is another man in the picture, I haven't seen any sign of him yet.'

'Let me sketch you his portrait,' Gently said. 'He would be a man of substance and reputation. A public figure. Possibly a man whose conduct is subject to professional scrutiny.'

Capel laughed outright. 'It won't do, you know. Virtue wasn't even a patient of mine. And if I was a candidate for Sodom, I would scarcely be practising on my doorstep.'

'Nor would you deceive a man you so much admire.'

'It wouldn't be in my nature,' Capel smiled.

'Or whose genius you might seek to protect.'

Capel smiled and dipped his head.

He sauntered back to the desk and hitched himself on the corner opposite Gently's. His eyes were still smiling but his mouth was set straight. He sat casually, like a big animal, one leg extended and one bent, his head a little to one side, his hands hanging loose.

'Do you think I had a finger in it?' he said.

Gently stared at him before replying. 'I think it might have crossed your mind to take some action,' he said.

'But killing him?'

'Someone killed him.'

'It doesn't have to be one of us. Homosexuals stick their necks out. It could have been a spur of the moment killing.'

'Not this one.'

'All the same, killing would be rather an extreme measure.'

'Are you suggesting it was manslaughter?'

Capel smiled and raised his hand in a disclaiming gesture.

'What I'm wondering,' Gently said, 'is why you and Friday didn't leave with the others. Hozeley went, Meares, Miss Hazlewood, but you and Friday stayed on. Why? Why didn't you go home to, say, warn your wife to expect Hozeley?'

Capel pretended to duck. 'That's one that Leyston missed out on! And the answer is quite damning. Tanya was out on Tuesday evening.'

'Your wife was out?'

'Yes. You might call Tanya a music-widow. She was playing bridge at the Walkers'. She didn't get in till past eleven.'

'So if you needed an alibi, you wouldn't have one?'

Capel aped an idiot grin. ‘Not a ghost of one. Leslie is in London, and the day of the live-in domestic is over. But to be specific, I was pretty certain that old Walt would take his time, and meanwhile I preferred a drink with Tom to going home to an empty house.’

‘A convivial drink.’

‘More or less. Though of course we did have things to mull over – like how to put the stuffing back into Walt and stop the performance going up the spout.’ He swung towards Gently. ‘And if you don’t mind me saying so, that’s still the number one priority – how we can deliver to the world a piece of music that surpasses even the *Beach Suite*.’

‘It takes precedence over murder?’

‘Yes – for me. Virtue is dead, you can’t help him. And it would only compound the crime to let his death interfere with the performance. That would be spiritual murder on top. And somehow I intend to prevent it.’

Gently stared. ‘But you’ve lost your soloist.’

‘Oh no.’ Capel jumped from the desk. ‘Heaven help me if I ever put my faith in a vessel as leaky as Virtue. Of course he could play, he could play our heads off – and Walt wrote the part especially to suit him. But the situation was a bomb. It could have blown up at any time in the past few weeks.’ He fell into a sudden squat before Gently. ‘I kept an understudy up my sleeve.’

‘An understudy . . . !’

‘Uhuh.’ The angled face grinned up at Gently. ‘I organized a copy of the score and sent it to Leslie in London. Leslie plays cello in a group at the hospital and knows a lot of solid players. He passed the score to a fellow called Davies, who’s been rehearsing the part for a month. He’s an intern, but he can get time off. I’m hoping to introduce him tonight.’

‘Then . . . you knew all along you could dispense with Virtue?’

‘I knew we were fireproof if he called off.’

‘That it was safe to deal with him.’

‘Don’t be naughty! Who we really had to deal with was Walt.’ He rocked back on his heels. ‘Walt’s reaction was critical. We couldn’t just give his protégé the push. All we could do was to be ready and try to persuade Walt to carry on.’

‘Which was the situation on Tuesday.’

‘Yes. And still the situation today.’

‘Except that now it isn’t complicated by Virtue.’ Capel unfolded from the floor. ‘Well – I didn’t kill him.’

He went round the desk and took from a drawer a silver box containing cigars. He offered them to Gently; Gently declined. Capel lit one and breathed smoke. Then he lapsed on the desk again and sat smoking and swinging his free leg.

‘So what about Walt?’

Gently shrugged. ‘Perhaps we can leave him on the shingle.’

Capel nodded. ‘I felt certain you were going to see it that way, in the end. And Leonard, he went off with Laurel. You can ask Marion what time her father got home.’

‘When did you leave The White Hart?’

‘At ten. It gives me over an hour adrift.’

‘You went with Friday?’

‘Only to the corner. Tom lives at the other end of The Street.’

Gently studied him through the cigar smoke. Capel's grey eyes leered. There was something Mephistophelean about the slanted head, straight nose and protruding chin.

'Want me to go on?'

'It's up to you.'

Capel took a firm puff. 'My house here in Saxton Road is only about half a mile from Walt's. I could have been there in ten minutes, ringing his doorbell like a maniac. Virtue comes out – What's the fuss? Quick, old Walt has stabbed himself. Virtue rushes after me and when we get in the lane I clobber him.'

'Clobber him . . . ?'

Capel hesitated. 'Wasn't that a good guess?'

'What would you clobber him with?'

'Oh, I don't know. Perhaps I'll leave you to fill in that bit.' He shaped smoke. 'So it's all over within fifteen minutes of my leaving Tom. When Tanya gets in I'm watching television in my slippers and a haze of smoke – Good rehearsal, Pooh? I explain – I'm a little worried about old Walt. But Walt turns up on cue, and the Good doctor and all go to bed.' He swung his leg. 'How many marks?'

'Why did you clobber him in the lane?'

'Huh?' Capel's eyes were keen.

'With a tale like that you could have taken him anywhere.'

'Oh well!' He rocked gaunt shoulders. 'It was all rather improvised, you know. I wanted to get on with it, and the lane was quiet. It seemed a good idea at the time.'

'But you'd need a weapon. Where did that come from?'

'I seem to have a blind spot about that.'

'Something hard and heavy.'

'It's no use. That bit has got displaced from my mind.'

'But you struck him with something.'

Capel shook his head. 'I must have picked up something on the way there. Perhaps a stake from somebody's fence, or an empty bottle. I don't know.'

'Then it wasn't you who knifed him?'

'What?' Capel's eyes jumped to Gently's.

'If he'd been knifed.'

Capel looked away, drew a little quickly on the cigar.

'But he wasn't – was he?'

'Wasn't he?'

'No. You practically admitted he was clobbered.'

'I admitted nothing.'

'Then you played me along, pretending I'd got the right idea!' He puffed a few times and stubbed the cigar. 'Well, you're better at this game than I am.' His eyes became mischievous. 'And anyway, I told you that our first priority was protecting Walt.'

'It isn't my first priority.'

'You'll never admit it, but you're batting for the angels just the same. I may be a child in your forensic clutches, but I know my man. You're no Himmler.'

'Who did go after Virtue?'

Capel slid from the desk. 'Would you say it was too early for a drink?'

Gently sighed. 'Not if it's beer!'

Capel reached over and pressed a button.

A maid brought the beer, which was chilled and bobbing with ice cubes. An attractive girl, she was perspiring in a pink housecoat and little else. Capel had loosened his collar and tie and draped his jacket over a chair. He ran a playful finger down the maid's spine: she jerked away, but obviously liked it. He sent Gently a leer.

'Down with sodomy. But alack, Phyllida's a patient.'

'It must be frustrating.'

'Drink your beer. I was only making a point.'

They drank. Whoever was losing out on the summer, it wasn't the brewers. Beer had suddenly become a necessity, like newspapers or soap. Capel, sprawling now on a chair by a window, sipped from his glass in large gulps. He looked more youthful than ever with his firm throat showing through the open collar.

'Do you expect to be here for the Festival?'

Gently drank, then shook his head.

'What made you mention manslaughter?'

Gently drank again. 'Did I mention it . . . ?'

'Yes – you did! Were you fishing, or do you really know something?'

Gently drained beer past ice cubes. 'Probably fishing. What's the idea of all those photographs?'

'What—? Oh!' Capel peeled off the chair. 'That's my hobby horse. Did nobody tell you? I see the idea has cropped up elsewhere now, but I think I was first in the field.'

'But what idea?'

'It struck me one autumn when I was spending a week in the lakes. I was visiting Castlerigg on one of those mizzly, chilly days that we've forgotten. I stood staring and wondering at the stones – they seemed so remote from human purposes. A roofless temple? In that climate? And why had the stones been left in the rough? Then it came to me in a bang: I was looking at a prehistoric launch site.'

'A rocket launch site . . . ?'

'What else? I've visited Woomera, you know. And this was perfect – a low, broad hill in a wide basin of mountains. All stone circles are astrally aligned and give the impression of being left unfinished – which would be the case if they were intended to support a superstructure of more perishable materials. That would have vanished, with all its accessories, leaving only the foundations for us to muse over.'

Gently crunched an ice cube. 'It's a theory.'

'Yes, but look – it's susceptible to proof! All it needs is a programme of circle excavation by people briefed to look for the right things.'

'And what would they be?'

Capel counted on his fingers. 'First, a high incidence of iron oxide in the soil. Second, traces of fusion and extreme heat and residual ash. Third, any bronze artefact that doesn't fit an established pattern. If enough of these were found on enough sites, it would be difficult to explain them by alternative theories.'

Gently drank. 'All that sounds familiar. I'm looking for much the same things every day – moral rust, signs of high temperature and behaviour that doesn't fit established patterns.'

Capel's eyes were lively. 'And have you found them here?'

'Perhaps a little of all three.'

'Oh dear! Not the first?'

'Wouldn't you say there were traces – if somebody is covering up for a killer?'

Capel came slowly back from the photographs. Now his grey eyes were still. He revolved his empty glass between his large palms.

'So – what will you do now?'

Gently drank. 'Follow your suggestion. Excavate more sites and eliminate the alternative theories.'

'But you'll lay off Walt?'

'I've done my digging there. I may have to check back on my results.'

'I don't mind you suspecting me, you know.'

Gently put down his glass. 'That's what worries me.'

He went, leaving Capel staring. At the door he surprised Miss Friday; she blushed and stood back awkwardly, then went into the routine of ushering him out. When he drove away she was still gazing after him: and so was Adam with the rake.

CHAPTER FOUR

ADDERS – WHAT TO Do If Bitten. The notice was pinned to the police station notice board, next to a red and yellow poster setting out the Festival programme. Hozeley's *Quintet* was billed No. 1, on Saturday at eight at the George V Hall: The Shinglebourne Chamber Music Quartet with soloist Terence Virtue (clarinet). Gently grunted as he read it: let no man programme for the morrow! Some adder had intervened, up there by the heath, with a bite too keen for sweet tea and tourniquets . . .

He lingered to fill his pipe before seeking the melting streets once more. He had parked the car, which had become intolerable, and left his jacket locked in the boot. Now, perspiring under a straw hat, he looked like any other casual visitor: an anonymous figure in sports shirt and sandals, hugging whatever shade offered.

Puffing, he set out along the pavement towards the town's end and the river. Despite the heat he passed people busy erecting banners and decorations. Posters appeared in most windows, a few flags were limply hanging; a bookseller was displaying a collection of scores and a draped photograph of the event's famous sponsor. The Festival was coming: it defied the heat, the glare, the smell of melting tar, the Pompeian columns of smoke behind the town: and a small matter of someone's dying.

Where The Street ended he paused to look back on the decorated, glare-dulled scene, the thoroughfare of small mid-Victorian frontages of rococo plaster and dark red brick. There was movement in a window: his eye went to it. A pale, neat face was staring down at him, a face with a clipped black moustache and expressionless dark eyes. Gently turned to it: the face vanished. The window was above an imposing street front. Equal to 12½ per cent at Basic Rate, said a discreet display: Save with The Eastwich Building Society. Gently waited. The face stayed away. After a moment, he plodded on.

Friday's Yard was at the bend of the river, where it took a ninety-degree turn southwards. There a hotch potch of tarred sheds stood around a larger structure with a concrete slipway. Beside the sheds a few old craft lay quietly flaking on stocks, ancient cutters and lean-gutted launches, their engine-bearers starting from sand-heavy bilges. On a cradle on the slip stood a small yacht with two men in boiler suits working on her. A shed by the entrance was sign-boarded: Office. Gently tapped; a man answered.

'Mr Friday . . . ?'

'That's me.'

Neither his manner nor his dress invited formality. He was clad simply in the bottom half of a boiler suit of which the top and sleeves were twisted round his waist. What one noticed was a squashed nose set in a broad-jawed, sun-darkened face,

rather close-set light brown eyes and a firm, large mouth. He was about forty-five. His hair was fair and he had the bowed shoulders and piston arms of a prizefighter.

'What's your name, then?'

Gently told him. Friday's eyes were shrewd for a moment.

'About Walt's bit of trouble is it?'

'You could call it that. Perhaps we can step into the office.'

Friday hesitated, then shook his head. 'It's as hot as the clappers in there, mate! If you want to talk we'll go up the yard. That's the coolest spot round here.'

He dived back into the office to return with a pipe in his hand, shouted to the two men that he'd be around, and beckoned to Gently to follow him. He led the way past the old hulks and by stacks of well-weathered timber till they came to a grassy slope bounded by an unkempt hedge. Here a tall hawthorn cast shade and a faint breeze came from the river. One looked across the yard and down the river-reach and the line of shingle dunes hiding the sea.

'We may as well sit.'

Friday dropped to a squat and rested his back against the hawthorn. He filled his pipe from a grimy rubber pouch and exhaled smoke in a long sigh.

'This perishing weather!'

'Isn't it good for trade?'

'What—?' Friday looked scornful. 'Nobody wants to go sailing in this weather. It's hotter out there than it is here.' He puffed, then pointed with his pipe. 'You know what will happen with that lot, don't you? The first time it rains it'll pour through the coamings of every boat on the ruddy moorings. My phone'll be red hot.' He glanced slyly at Gently. 'Of course, I'm stocked up with putty and Sylglass.'

'You won't have so much time for music then?'

'Nor for anything else I won't.'

'Why did you stay behind on Tuesday?'

'Why? To knock back a pint. Why else?'

Gently lowered himself to the grass and found a fence post for his back. It was a pleasant enough spot up there, in spite of the raffle of the yard below. The moorings were patched with colourful craft, each swung to the weak ebb, and the river unravelled southwards between marsh and dunes, almost straight, into azured haze. Ten miles it paced beside the dunes before reluctantly joining the sea. On the breeze a slight fragrance of marsh-litter mingled with the odour of seaweed. Friday spat a shred of tobacco.

'That louse Virtue. He was born to make trouble.'

'Did you have any dealings with him?'

'Do me a favour! You could just see Virtue in a boat.'

'But other dealings . . . ?'

Friday stared at him. 'Do I look like one of those? If it had been our Second Violin, now, you might have had cause to ask me.' He picked up a pebble and threw it with a jerk to rattle on scrap below. 'I'm a widower,' he said. 'I'm no angel, but don't come accusing me of the other.'

'Who was the man, then?'

'How should I know? Likely it was all a lie in the first place. If Walt can't tell you, I can't.'

'So . . . why did you stay behind with the doctor?'

Friday said nothing for a few moments. He squatted and gazed out at the river. A

single sail, a half-decker, was trying to stem the ebb. With bare breeze it seemed to rest still on the pale, unreflecting surface, then moved feebly, a yard at a time, towards the yacht club's skeleton jetty.

'That's why you've come here . . . isn't it?'

Gently fanned himself with his hat.

'Have you talked to the doctor?'

Gently nodded. 'Hasn't your daughter been on the phone?'

Friday struck a fresh light. The match wavered slightly and he drew on the pipe with vigour. He snapped the stem of the match and dug the pieces into the earth.

'All right then – you may as well have it! Like I told you, I'm no angel. After the way that devil behaved I wanted to go after him and sort him out.'

'You wanted to go after him?'

'That's right. I reckoned it was time he was given his orders. Because Walt wouldn't have carried on with him around, whether we got an understudy or not.'

'You intended to run him out of town?'

Friday nodded, puffing fiercely. 'And I still reckon that was the way to handle it, for all Dr Henry's clever ideas.'

'But you're saying you didn't.'

'That's what I'm saying.'

Gently stared at him and said nothing.

The half-decker still hadn't made the jetty and was looking as though perhaps it never would. From standing still it had begun to make sternway, was widening the gap between stem and staithe. It had reached a wind-shadow: opposite the yacht club the spit of land was capped by a squat tower, probably used as a line-marker. Generations of yachtsmen must have cursed it.

'Now look,' Friday said. 'Let's talk some sense. I hadn't any reason to do him in.'

Gently made passes with his hat. 'It could have been an accident,' he said.

'No it couldn't – not with me. I've been in the business since I was a kid. I was an ABA finalist two years running and won the title in fifty-six. I've stopped plenty. But they all got up to shake my hand afterwards.'

'They'd be men of your own weight,' Gently said.

'Look – how was he killed? Tell me that.'

'By a violent blow.'

'But not from a fist.'

Gently simply went on fanning.

Friday took some quick whiffs. 'You're just trying it on, mate,' he said. 'You think you'll get me to drop my guard and then whip one in. That's the game.'

He snatched down a bunch of the fat blackish-red haws that decorated the hawthorn and aimed them, one by one, at an empty oil drum below. He was a good shot. The haws made a satisfying clang on the drum.

'Didn't Dr Henry tell you he'd talked me out of it?'

'The doctor was prudent enough not to mention it.'

'He would be, wouldn't he?' Friday sounded sour. 'But that's the long and the short of it. Bashing Virtue was too simple, it was only going to upset old Walt. But I reckon with Virtue out of the way we could have talked Walt round. Walt isn't a mug. He might have sulked, but he wouldn't have stood in his own light.'

'What was the doctor's solution then?'

Friday discharged a haw. ‘Talk.’

‘Talking to Virtue?’

‘Who else. He said he knew how the little louse worked.’

‘How . . . ?’

‘He didn’t tell me, did he? Just made it sound like he knew the answers. That’s the way Dr Henry carries on, keeping everything close to his chest.’

‘Did he say when he’d talk to him?’

‘No.’ Friday reached for fresh ammunition. ‘And if you’re thinking he went after him on Tuesday then you don’t know the doctor. *He* went home to talk to Walt, you can take that for gospel, and maybe to think up some fresh tricks. He was for letting Virtue stew.’

‘He didn’t do it, you didn’t do it.’

‘That’s the cut of it,’ Friday said.

Gently fanned. ‘It leaves Walt in the middle.’

Friday slammed home another haw.

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One of the men came across from the sheds and approached them apologetically.

‘Tom, we’ve found some rot in the hog.’

‘Oh, God’s bloody pyjamas!’ Friday groaned. ‘Much?’

‘There’s quite a bit . . .’

‘Foxy’ll have my guts for garters. I looked her over before he bought her and told him she only needed some planks.’

He jumped up and hastened down to the slip. Gently and the man followed. The yacht on the cradle was a good-looking sloop of around four tons, with a trace of tumble-home in her bilge lines and a firmly raked transom. Planks had been removed below the waterline to reveal the curved timbers. Friday, kneeling on the cradle, dug ferociously with a screwdriver.

‘A bit of softening . . . I don’t think it’s rot.’

‘You could shove your fist through the garboard, Tom.’

‘So that’s the reason then, isn’t it? Even ruddy oak will soften.’ He straightened up and jumped down from the cradle. ‘We’ll leave it till tomorrow to dry out. Then we’ll tap it and soak it with Protim . . . and for Christ’s sake stop giving me heart attacks!’

He stood brushing sweat from his face and eyeing the lines of the little yacht; then his tanned shoulders heaved and he turned towards Gently.

‘Are you a sailing man?’

Gently hunched.

‘This one belongs to Foxy Meares.’

‘Leonard Meares . . . ?’

Friday nodded. ‘But perhaps you haven’t got around to him yet.’

He jammed his dead pipe in his mouth and set off back to the hawthorn. There was sourness in his expression and a determination about his movements. They sat again. The half-decker was still loitering near the jetty, but now a more fortunate sail, heading downstream, had emerged from the haze towards Thwaite. It tacked with great deliberation, barely heeling on its boards. Friday kept an eye on it.

‘Is Walt your man, then?’

Gently grunted and eased into the grass. Little cream moths, shiny-winged, rose

irritably and settled again. ‘Would it stop the performance?’

‘What do you think? We couldn’t go on with Walt in the nick.’

‘It might get you publicity.’

‘We don’t need that sort. If you pinch Walt the show is off.

Gently plucked a stem of the grass. ‘Do *you* think he was capable of it?’ he said.

‘Walt?’ Friday paused, scowling. ‘I wouldn’t know, would I, with that sort of seacook.’

‘Then why should we think differently?’

Friday was silent; he sucked air through a cold pipe. The yacht from Thwaite had sailed clear of the haze and showed now as a yawl, its mizzen plain.

Gently chewed on his stem. ‘Walt’s the man with a motive. He was adrift for two hours after the rehearsal. He’s active enough to have dealt Virtue. And Dr Capel is keeping him under sedation.’

Friday kept sucking.

‘I talked to him this morning and he made some damaging admissions about Virtue. Inspector Leyston is with him now. I daresay he’ll be taking Walt to the police station.’

Friday sucked faster.

‘He fits the pattern, of course. Normally our first suspect is the husband or wife. In this instance Hozeley stands as the husband and Virtue as the wife playing fast and loose.’

Gently leaned back and chewed composedly, his eyes watching the yawl. Friday was sitting bold upright, pipe sagging, his scowling face hot.

‘But you can’t *do* that.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it doesn’t make any sense.’

‘The jury will like it.’

‘To hell with the jury! I was the one who was there.’

‘You were . . . where?’

‘At that rehearsal. Trying to keep my hands off Virtue.’ He snatched the pipe away violently and jerked himself closer to Gently. ‘Now you just listen to me, mate. What I’m telling you beats guessing. When Virtue cleared off after the row Walt wasn’t in a shape to kill anyone. He was knocked up, you understand? What he needed most was a shot of brandy. When he left the hotel he was like a man who’d been hit over the head with a crowbar. And I was worried, I can tell you, in case he took a walk in the sea. But him going after Virtue is a laugh – he hadn’t enough steam left to swat a fly.’

Gently chewed. ‘He’d have had time to recover.’

‘That’s damned nonsense. He was pooped.’

‘Suppose he was shamming.’

‘Pull the other one. You can’t act going grey in the face.’

Gently turned his head to spit grass. ‘So you’re convinced of Hozeley’s innocence.’

‘That’s what I’m saying and it’s the truth. You’re never going to hang it on Old Walt.’

Gently sucked his stem. ‘Well . . . Meares is out. He and Miss Hazlewood left together. And we can pass the doctor.’ He tossed away the grass. ‘It does seem to leave only you.’

The clusters of haws hung conveniently; Gently, in his turn, reached up to pluck some. He took careful aim at the oil drum and succeeded in bouncing a haw off the top. Friday was staring at him like a man who'd just been touched with a hot poker. His mouth was agape, showing strong but nicotine-stained teeth.

'So then . . . it is me you're after!'

Gently shrugged. 'The cap seems to fit.'

'Oh no it doesn't. I didn't go after him – he was home and dry by the time I left!'

'But you could have got him out again, couldn't you?'

'How could I have done that?'

Gently aimed a haw. 'Oh . . . any excuse. Say that Walt was injured and was asking for him.'

Friday's eyes were round. 'But that's all balls!'

'I think it would have fetched him,' Gently said. 'Of course you may not have thought of the trick yourself. But it may have been put to you by someone who did.'

'You mean – Dr Henry?'

Gently fired a haw.

'You're raving,' Friday said. 'Bloody raving. Dr Henry was all against it. It was him that stopped me from going after him.'

'That's your tale.'

'But it's true. You go to the doctor and ask him.'

Gently smiled, drew a haw and hit the oil drum dead centre.

'Can anyone vouch for you . . . apart from your daughter?'

'I don't know – someone must have seen me.'

'But someone you can name?'

'I tell you I don't know! I wasn't thinking about that when I was walking home.'

'There's a footpath, isn't there, across the Common, joining the road near Gorse Cottage? That would be your quickest way back – and of course, unfrequented at that time of night.'

'I wasn't out at Gorse Cottage!'

'But if you had been, you'd have taken that footpath?'

'Look – for Christ's sake can't you believe me?'

'I'd find it easier with a witness.'

Friday scrubbed at the sweat that was drenching him; his scowling eyes looked dazed. Below them the yawl, a blue-painted vessel, was approaching the bend in a tight haul. Now it too had encountered the wind-shadow and its masthead jib had begun to slat.

'This is all a try-on . . . that's it, isn't it?'

Reluctantly, the yawl was putting in a tack. As it came about the sun flashed blindingly from glassy paint and varnish. Then it picked up a course that would have been losing but for the friendly direction of the tide.

'Look, if that's the game . . . !' Friday raked off sweat. 'I'm not the only fish in the pond. I don't know about Foxy's going off with Laurel, but he was out there damn soon after Virtue.'

'Meares . . . ?'

'Yes – clever-boy Meares. He could have seen Laurel home and doubled back. And how was it he left his cello in the Music Room, when always before he'd taken it home with him?'

'Did he do that?'

‘Yes he did. You’d better do your homework, mate. And here’s another thing – it was Foxy who was narking him, saying we should dump him and bring in an understudy. I’ll bet the doctor didn’t tell you that – nor that he’s such a pal of Foxy’s.’

Gently poised a haw. ‘You think the doctor might cover for him?’

‘I know he would mate, never mind about thinking. And if you really want to have a go at Foxy, you listen to what I’m telling you now.’ He leaned nearer to Gently, his eyes hard. ‘On Wednesday morning he called at the doctor’s – was in there with him for above an hour – patients with appointments queuing up and getting on to my girl for keeping them out. So what was that about, hey? And before your lot had come taking statements. And Foxy was in a state was what my girl said, and still in a state when he left. Now you tell me!’ He eased back from Gently, a leer in his close-set eyes.

‘Didn’t your daughter tell you what it was about?’

‘What could she hear – out there with the patients?’

‘It could have been a consultation.’

‘What – for an hour?’ Friday snatched his head back, shedding sweat. ‘I wouldn’t have told you, and that’s straight, if you hadn’t tried to pin it on me. But I’m not carrying the can for anybody, least of all for clever-boy Meares. I don’t owe him any money – not like some I could mention round here.’

He struck a match on the bole of the hawthorn and relit his pipe with measured puffs. The scowl still moulded his face but touched now with a shade of complacency. He puffed smoke towards the distant yawl which, clear of its tack, was drifting through the bend.

‘Still . . . it was you who advocated violence.’

Friday powered smoke. ‘Meaning what?’

‘If there was a conspiracy to get rid of Virtue, wouldn’t you have been deputed to put the boot in?’

‘But aren’t I telling you—!’

‘You haven’t told me much. Just tried to switch my interest to Meares. You aren’t out of the wood yet, Mr Friday – not if that’s the best you can do.’

Friday’s eyes were sullen. ‘So that’s it, then.’

‘If you’ve more to say, you’d better say it.’

‘I reckon I’ve said too bloody much now.’ He jumped to his feet and stood glowering down at Gently. ‘You’re a right son of a seacook, aren’t you?’

Gently tipped his hat and leaned back in the grass. The half-decker, at last, had reached the yacht club jetty and the yawl had cleared the bend and picked up a wind.

CHAPTER FIVE

A COLOURFUL NEW banner had gone up in The Street: The Peacock Players present *Twelfth Night*. But now it was the hour of the lunchtime siesta when every shop door was closed. A street of silence: the only vehicles were those standing shimmering at the kerb, and no face appeared at any window as Gently tramped back to the police station. The sun had won; the town, its victim, lay depopulated and stunned.

Leyston was waiting in his shirtsleeves and divested of his tie. He had his feet up on the desk, but withdrew them discretely as Gently entered.

'I've booked you a table at The White Hart, sir.'

'You'd better come along to give it ballast.'

Leyston's long face expressed pleasure. He rose and began rolling down his sleeves.

'Have you had any luck, sir?'

Gently grunted. 'Did you get anything new from Hozeley?'

'Not exactly from Hozeley, sir, but I got something. It could be a line on those chummies from Streatham.'

'The Parry brothers?'

'Yes sir.' Leyston buttoned his sleeves with conscious modesty. 'Of course, it may have no connection. But the description sounds about right.'

Gently dropped on a chair. 'Tell me.'

'Well sir, it was the Crag lad. After we left he went to Hozeley and told him about a man who'd spoken to him on Monday.'

'Monday was one of his days at the cottage?'

'Yes sir. This happened just as he was leaving. Crag lives with his grandfather down at Town End, so he uses the footpath across the Common. There's a gate from the garden on to the Common. This chummie was waiting just outside. He asked young Crag who lived at the cottage, and if he hadn't got a young man called Virtue staying with him.'

Gently pouted his lips. 'How good is the description?'

'Crag wasn't too strong with the details, sir. He isn't very bright, as no doubt you noticed, and he was nervous when he talked to me.' Leyston eased a cuff. 'About thirty-five, sir, around six feet, with dark hair, dressed in a blue shirt and dark-coloured slacks, speaking with an accent that Crag took for Cockney.'

'It might fit Frank Parry.'

'Apart from the age, sir, and Parry's being only five-ten-and-a-half.'

'Has Crag seen the photographs?'

'I showed him a spread, but he picked a villain who's doing a stretch.'

Gently made a face. 'Who spun you this tale – was it Crag on his own, or did Hozeley prompt him?'

‘It was Hozeley who mentioned it, sir. But the kid confirmed what he said.’

‘And Crag was nervous?’

‘Yes, sir.’ Leyston touched a sideboard uncertainly. ‘Do you reckon he was put up to it?’

‘That’s what I would reckon – if it wasn’t for the Parrys.

Yet even the Parrys were no guarantee if Virtue had boasted of his exploits, giving Hozeley to understand that he had enemies in town who might seek him out. And the description, conveniently vague, might well have come from the same source. Gently sighed.

‘One thing is certain – if there was a man, and the man was Frank Parry. He was here on Monday, which means he may have stayed in the town overnight.’

Leyston echoed the sigh. ‘Yes sir. I’ll put a couple of men on it.’

‘And meanwhile I need some information. What time did Leonard Meares get home?’

‘Meares, sir . . . ?’

Leyston had been about to pick up the phone. Now he hesitated, his hand poised: his tone sounding almost reproachful.

‘Yes – Meares. His statement ends with the time he left The White Hart. I assume you checked him out further than that, even though he left in impeccable company.’

Leyston coloured slightly. ‘Yes sir. I did have a word with him and his wife. Seems he got in at about nine-fifty. He had a bit of trouble after leaving the hotel.’

‘What sort of trouble?’

Leyston grew pinker. ‘Got caught short is what I mean, sir. There’s a bug going around with all this hot weather – I’ve had a dose of it myself.’

Gently stared. ‘And you accepted that?’

‘Well – yes, sir. Yes, I did. I’ve known Mr Meares for a long time, and – well, his wife was present when I questioned him.’

‘What has his wife got to do with it?’

Now Leyston was looking positively unhappy. ‘She – she’s a bit of a case, sir. I didn’t want to put him in the wrong with her.’ He ran his tongue over his lips. ‘You see, she’s jealous of Miss Hazlewood. There’s nothing in it, sir, nothing at all. But I didn’t like to query him in front of his wife.’

‘So Meares was adrift for half an hour too.’

Leyston didn’t try to contradict it.

‘Where does Meares live?’

Leyston gulped. ‘In Tunstall Road, off the top end of The Street.’

‘That’ll be less than a mile from Hozeley’s.’

Leyston nodded. ‘All the same, sir—’

‘In half an hour he could have gone after Virtue, clobbered him in the lane, and been back home.’

Leyston slumped into the desk chair. ‘Look, sir . . . Mr Meares isn’t that sort at all, ! He’s a member of the Rotary and the yacht club and runs the Birdwatchers’ Association. He’s a man you can trust, sir. I can’t see the likes of him going in for violence. I wouldn’t put it past Friday, nor even the doctor. But Mr Meares is another matter.’

‘A man of stainless reputation.’

‘Yes, sir. That’s what he is.’

‘Which would make him a perfect mark for Virtue.’

‘Sir—!’ Leyston almost choked on his tongue.

‘What’s Capel’s number?’

Leyston gave it miserably and Gently reached for the phone and dialled. After an interval he got Capel, who apparently had been fetched from his lunch.

‘Just a minute . . . I’ve got some coffee!’ There followed a sound of quick gulping. ‘Ach . . . it tastes foul in this weather! What can I do for you, Superintendent?’

‘Is Meares your patient?’

‘Leonard? He’s been on my books for years.’

‘So you can tell me the present state of his health.’

‘Well, I suppose so – if it concerns you.’

‘It concerns me.’

Capel chuckled. ‘You’ve been busy with a spade, Superintendent! What you want to know is whether Leonard was telling the truth about Tuesday night.’

‘And?’

‘I must confirm it. Leonard had a dose of false dysentery. He consulted me yesterday morning and I prescribed a kaolin treatment.’

‘Would that have taken you an hour during a busy surgery?’

‘Oh, an hour is an exaggeration.’

‘Not according to my information.’

‘Well, if you say so, Superintendent.’ The line was harmonic for a moment. ‘Of course, I didn’t time Leonard’s consultation and it might have run on for a few minutes. But not for an hour. You will have to take my word for it against your informant’s.’

‘And of course, your discussion with him was privileged.’

‘Strictly between doctor and patient. On which subject I may as well inform you that both Walt and Tom Friday are patients of mine.’

Gently grunted. ‘That would be no excuse in a case of obstruction.’

‘I must bear it in mind,’ Capel laughed. ‘Is that all?’

Gently hung up.

Leyston had been listening anxious eyed: now he regarded Gently with concern.

‘Sir . . . is it true that Mr Meares was with the doctor for an hour yesterday?’

Gently nodded. ‘I put pressure on Friday. His daughter Marion is Capel’s receptionist. Meares was there for over an hour yesterday morning, allegedly in a disturbed state.’

‘Still . . . it might just have been his tummy, sir.’

‘Did you visit the Music Room yesterday?’

‘Yes, I did, sir.’

‘Was Meares’s cello there?’

‘Yes, sir. In its case, standing on the platform.’

‘On every other evening he’d taken it home with him. On this one evening he didn’t. And it was Meares who provoked the row with Virtue by suggesting they drop him for an understudy.’

‘But sir!’ Leyston’s eyes were pained. ‘You’re forgetting that he left the hotel with Miss Hazlewood.’

‘Where does she live?’

‘Off Saxton Road, sir.’

‘That’s on the way.’

‘But all the same . . .’

All the same it was a load of nonsense, was what Leyston left his expression to say: you couldn’t believe such stuff about a citizen with the credit rating of Leonard Meares.

‘You think Friday might have been having me on?’

‘I think he might try, sir, if you were pushing him. It’s a fact that he doesn’t love Mr Meares – some fuss about a mortgage that didn’t go through.’ Leyston tested a sideboard. ‘And now we’ve got this lead, sir, the chummie who was asking the Crag boy questions. I reckon that’s more in character with the case – and you did say the Parrys didn’t have an alibi.’

Gently shook his head. ‘We’re still feeling around.’

‘But if we do get a line on Frank Parry, sir . . .’

‘Then we’ll have to think again!’

He grinned wryly and heaved himself from his chair.

The White Hart was quarter of a mile from the police station and Leyston kept silence on the way there. With his jacket over his arm, he made rather an absurd figure in the waistcoat and long sleeves. He wore, Gently noticed, black Oxford shoes of a type scarcely to be found in town, a line perhaps reserved for undertakers. But they suited the style of the man.

As they approached the hotel he gave an exclamation.

‘Hozeley must be in there, sir.’

He pointed to a double line of cars parked on the plain before the hotel. One was distinctive: a black Rolls-Royce that might have strayed from someone’s museum.

‘Is that Hozeley’s?’

‘Yes, sir. It was left him with the cottage.’

‘Does he drive it?’

‘Oh yes, sir. Like you or me might drive a Mini.’

They paused beside it. It was a glorious beast of late twenties vintage, with a carriage-like body, horizontally-slatted radiator and coned wheels with eared hubcaps. Inside there was sufficient headroom and carpet almost to have walked up and down, while the gadgets and instruments on the dash belonged to an era awesomely remote. Nevertheless, it was a drivable vehicle. Just standing by it one could get the feel. Climb in behind that flat steering wheel and height and bulk would fall into place . . .

‘What do you reckon it’s worth, sir?’ Leyston murmured.

‘Too much for it to be left around in public.’

‘Old Mrs Suffling had a chauffeur for it. But Hozeley’s always driven it himself.’

‘Yesterday morning, where did you find it?’

‘Parked out here, sir, like now.’

‘That supports his story.’

‘He could have brought it back, sir. Or someone could have brought it back for him.’

Yes they could: it was not a point that the ingenious doctor would overlook. Gently gave the Rolls a parting nod and turned away.

‘Let’s interrogate lunch.’

In fact the meal was nearly over when they entered the hotel’s spacious dining room, with its tall, broad windows facing the Front and the sea. More than half the tables

were vacated and at others they were dallying over coffee. There was an uninhibited chatter of conversation, as though those present were members of a single group.

'Festival visitors,' Leyston muttered as they were shown to a table by a window. 'They come here early to book accommodation. There'll be nothing left in town by tomorrow.'

'Is it always a sell-out?'

'Yes, sir. Everything's taken for miles around. A lot of them drive up from London each day, and then the trick is to find parking.'

Certainly the clientele appeared more cosmopolitan than one would expect in a country town hotel. Gently took interested stock of the other lunchers as he disembowelled a prawn cocktail. There was chatter in French, in German, even a steady stream of Russian, along with cooing and meticulous English and accents identifiably Scots and Welsh. And exotic types to go with the chatter; smooth, insouciant faces and decorative clothes. At the next table sat a silk-shirted Italian and a dark, svelte female with a yard of cigarette-holder . . .

'There's Hozeley, sir.'

Leyston nodded to a corner. The composer sat alone at a single table. Before him was a coffee cup. He was smoking a cigar and staring through a window at the shingle and sea.

'I think he's spotted us,' Leyston murmured. 'But he doesn't want to know.'

Gently made a mouth. 'That's understandable.'

'Perhaps we should have another chat with him, sir.'

'Aren't you hungry?' Gently said.

'Well . . . yes, sir!'

'I doubt if Hozeley will run away.'

Their salad came, with fresh lobster, and Hozeley showed no sign of departing. Once or twice his eye slid towards them, to return at once to contemplation of the sea. A massive but shapeless figure: it could easily have been a woman who sat there smoking, her untidy grey hair reaching to her collar, her large but fine hand holding the cigar. And strangely, he seemed in his place, among those people babbling many tongues, though alone and regarding only the sea, though apart: he seemed at home. They were his disciples, if they knew it or not, and to each he could speak a familiar language. The heavy, slumped smoker in his solitary corner was the key presence in that room.

'Just an ice and peach to follow.'

The rest of the tables were emptying now. Lunchers were sauntering out to their cars, the Renaults, Citroëns, Volks and Alfas. Hozeley was almost at the end of his cigar: he dabbed it in the tray near him. But still he sat on. A waiter, passing his table, paused enquiringly, but went on his way.

'I think he's waiting for us, sir.'

'Did anything new come up when you saw him?'

'Not apart from Crag, sir. He was acting vague. I thought perhaps the doctor had overdone the dope.'

More than likely; and perhaps that accounted for his immobility now. Or perhaps he was merely waiting for them to leave, in hope of avoiding a fresh encounter.

They finished their lunch. A waiter poured coffee: from the corner of his eye Gently saw Hozeley rise. Slowly, the big man collected his jacket, put away his lighter, and started towards them.

‘I wish to speak with you.’

‘Please sit down.’

‘I would sooner it was somewhere more private.’

His blue eyes fixed on Gently’s determinedly and his tone was calmly resolute.

‘Very well. Where do you suggest?’

‘We can use the private lounge.’

‘Why not the Music Room?’

Hozeley’s mouth twitched. ‘If you prefer it we can go there.’

Gently drank his coffee. They followed Hozeley from the dining room into a passage, then into a well-proportioned room fitted with sound equipment and a stage. Four music stands stood on the stage, with a grand piano pushed back behind them. Chairs were stacked along a wall and others scattered about the room. The walls were lined with dyed hessian, the floor carpeted with spongy matting. A range of thickly curtained windows looked out on the coast road and the sea. The room had a close, dead feel: it smelled faintly of hessian and cigar smoke.

‘Were you here earlier?’

Hozeley nodded.

‘What for?’

‘I was . . . trying to remember.’

He crossed the room, opened a window and stood inhaling the fresher air.

‘You know that Henry wants to bring in an understudy.’

‘Is that all you have to tell me?’

Hozeley shook his head. He came back from the window, hesitated, sat himself on the edge of the stage.

‘Since it happened I’ve been so . . . confused. I couldn’t bear to think about it quietly.’ He touched his chest. ‘Something in there was scattering my thoughts. I was living in chaos.’

‘And now?’

Hozeley drew a deep sigh. ‘Now, I think I may have got over it. I came here to force myself to relive it – to see it with someone else’s eyes.’ He spread his hands. ‘Of course I was infatuated. I can bear to say that now. Terry was never truly fond of me, never disinterested in his kindness. His talent blinded me. I longed to cherish it, to keep it always by me. And so I believed what I wanted to believe . . . that Terry responded in all truth.’ His eyes met Gently’s squarely. ‘I am responsible for what happened here. The blame for it lies in my egotism. Yes – I knew what I was doing.’

‘You were scarcely responsible for Virtue’s character.’

‘But I was responsible for holding him prisoner.’

‘In Virtue’s eyes, you were the sucker.’

‘Does that absolve me?’ Hozeley sank his head. ‘I accept all you say about Terry. He was dishonest and predatory. But perhaps at least he was more honest than I, in casting my folly back in my teeth. That was his most-loving deed. He dispelled the mist from my eyes.’ He brushed back a lock from his face. ‘What he did here was deliberate,’ he said. ‘That is what I wanted to tell you. Terry was working to a plan.’

‘A plan . . . ?’

‘Yes – a plan.’ Hozeley’s mouth had set grim. ‘At first I was too upset to realize it, but it’s plain enough to me now. He wanted the cottage on his own that night. That was the reason for his behaviour. He knew that if he were outrageous enough I wouldn’t be able to face going back there.’

Gently paused, staring at Hozeley. ‘What led you to think that?’

‘Everything.’ Hozeley stared back. ‘The way it developed, from the very beginning. Terry knew what he was doing. It wasn’t a question of loss of touch. He was deliberately sabotaging the rehearsal by coming in late and modifying his timing. Then when I failed to rise to that he resorted to the most wounding abuse he could think of, telling me finally that he intended leaving me and hinting that there was someone else.’ Hozeley plunged fingers into his hair. ‘I am ashamed to say that he succeeded. His insinuations even implicated the Quartet, not excluding Miss Hazlewood.’

‘She was specifically referred to?’

‘She was glanced at. But the insinuations were preposterous. He was heartily disliked by the other players – even in my blindness I was conscious of that.’

Gently glanced at Leyston, who was looking blank.

‘So what could have been the motive for this plan, then?’

Hozeley gazed wretchedly at the matting. ‘I have to accept there was another man.’

‘Have you any suggestions?’

‘Yes – now.’ His shoulders heaved resignedly. ‘Clearly it was the man who spoke to David on Monday.’

‘Him!’

‘Doesn’t that follow? His interest in Terry was explicit.’

Gently’s stare was less than encouraging. ‘I don’t think it follows at all. We knew nothing about that man except that your gardener has just remembered him.’

Hozeley hesitated. ‘You think David was lying?’

‘I think David was put up to it.’

Hozeley was silent, his mouth drooping. Then he shook his head with decision. ‘No. David is too naive. He would have told me if that were the case. I’m certain that David did see the man, and that he was the man Terry planned to meet.’

Gently clicked his tongue. ‘That’s too convenient.’

‘I’m sorry you should think so,’ Hozeley said coldly. ‘But this is no device of mine, if that is the insinuation.’

‘Did Virtue never speak to you about his past?’

‘If he did, it was confidential.’

‘About people who might have cause to be his enemies?’

Hozeley’s face took an obstinate set. ‘I have told you what I think, Superintendent. Your suspicions are quite unfounded. What is significant is that Terry had a motive in seeking to prevent me returning to the cottage. What it was is sufficiently plain. And further than that I can’t help you.’

‘Then perhaps the doctor can.’

‘The doctor . . . ?’

Hozeley’s eyes came to his quickly. But before Gently could press his advantage the spring-door bumped and a waiter entered.

‘A Chief Superintendent Gently . . . ?’

‘That’s me.’

‘There’s a phone call for you, sir.’

Grunting impatience, Gently followed the waiter to a pay-box in the hall.

‘Gently here.’

‘Greetings, old top.’ The Etonian accents were Pagram’s. ‘I thought you’d like to

hear news of some of your grubby friends in town. Les Parry fr'eres, in fact. We made a pass at them with your cadaver. They sang the sweetest little duet, all about a ware-house break-in at Croydon.'

'Is that straight up?'

'Like the Post Office Tower. Met. have recovered the loot from Balham. Sorry if it blights your life, old fruit, but now you win one, now you don't.'

'I can live with it,' Gently said. 'What's the thermometer showing back there?'

'Ninety-six. I'm sitting in my pants and Blondie plainly isn't wearing a bra.'

Gently hung up. Outside, Leyston waited.

'I'm afraid I had to let Hozeley go, sir.'

'Never mind him now. And forget Frank Parry. That angle just went out of the window.'

'Sir . . . ?'

'We're back with the natives.'

Leyston's ruled-off face grew longer. 'Does that mean Mr Meares, sir?'

'It means a solo for the Cello – after a few bars from Second Violin.'

Leaving Leyston to gape, he strode through the hall and out of the hotel porch. The Rolls was just being backed, with its front wheels crossed in a crazy-looking lock. They straightened again: the Rolls whispered forward, Hozeley aloof in his high seat. He spared no look for Gently but, God in a Machine, turned the corner and tickered away.

CHAPTER SIX

THE HAZLEWOOD HOUSE, brick and roughcast, stood facing a lawn bleached the colour of parchment, and a white Alfasud nestled in a car port before the doors of a multiple garage. But Miss Hazlewood was out, her mother told them: she was helping to prepare the church for the Festival. A cared-for blonde, she offered them a drink and seemed half sorry to see them go.

'Plenty of cash there, sir,' Leyston muttered, as they tramped back down the tarmac drive. 'Maynard Hazlewood has a finger in contracting. His wife is a cousin of Dr Capel.'

'Just one happy family,' Gently grunted.

'Yes, sir. The brass are pretty close in Shinglebourne.'

'Close enough to close ranks when it comes to trouble.'

'You might say that, sir,' Leyston said, carefully.

A cluster of cars shared the lime-shaded park at the west end of the church, and electricians were unloading speakers and rolls of cable from a van. The several doors of the church stood open; people were issuing in and out. From the interior, unexpectedly, came a sudden trill of piano notes.

'There'll be recitals here most of the week, sir . . .'

They pushed in, jostled by the electricians. The church was a large, light, wide building with a timbered roof and broad aisles. Few of the windows had stained glass and the sun was pouring in unchecked; the church smelled equally of incense, paraffin, polish and dried musty prayer books. Perhaps because it lacked coolness it gave the impression of being a worn-out building, of having been perversely kept patched and cobbled when its true usefulness had departed.

'There's Miss Hazlewood – at the piano, sir.'

An ebony-cased grand stood near the screen. Two men in overalls were adjusting its position while a girl stood by them, finger on chin. Behind, in the chancel, women were shining brasses, and others were arranging floral displays. Then there were the electricians on tall ladders and nurserymen staggering up the aisles with pot plants.

'That's Capel's gardener.' Gently's eye had fallen on a bald crown bending over a tray of fuchsias.

'Yes, sir – he's the verger here, William Crag. He's David Crag's grandfather.'

'Is that so?'

It offered one more link in an already extensive chain. If the doctor had wanted to plant beguiling information, there was his instrument, dead-heading the fuchsias. But Leyston had read Gently's thoughts.

'I doubt if there's be anything comic with him, sir. He's a bible-thumper of the old school, always ready to quote a text at you.'

'So the smiting of sodomites might appeal to him.'

Leyston shook his head, unsmiling. The elder Crag, straightening from his labours,

paused to give them a hard stare.

They continued up the aisle. By now the piano had arrived at a definitive location, and Laurel Hazlewood stood at the keyboard sounding critical chords and trills.

'Miss Hazlewood?'

'A moment, please.'

Her face intent, she went on playing. At last with a final dab she stood back to survey the intruders.

'Is this going to take long?'

Laurel Hazlewood regarded them with earnest, greenish-brown eyes. She had elvish, rather gamin features, with short, auburn hair and a freckled complexion. Her figure was light and trim and her voice plangent but cultivated. She was twenty-four; she wore a plain sleeveless top with a dirndl skirt and strapless sandals.

'Perhaps a few minutes.'

'I hope you'll be quick, because the electricians are fixing the mikes. They always get them wrong unless someone is there to tell them.'

'If you'll step this way.'

With a show of reluctance she went with them into the south aisle, where the war memorial made a screen between part of the aisle and the nave. Gently pointed to a pew. Miss Hazlewood sat and arranged her skirt over her knees.

'I've been reading your statement, Miss Hazlewood.'

'Have you?' She gave the skirt a touch.

'Now that you've had time to think things over I'm wondering if you can add a little to it.'

'I'm not sure I can.'

'For example, the rehearsal. I'd like to know exactly how the trouble began.'

'Oh, I see.' She made a little grimace. 'Not much mystery about that, I would have thought.'

'It was all Virtue's doing?'

'Entirely. He simply set himself to wreck us. In the end, it got so chronic that it was pointless going on.'

'And then Mr Hozeley put a stop to it.'

'Oh no. Walt was willing to carry on. But the Quartet had had enough, so we opted out. And that was that.'

'It was a general response.'

She stared. 'I suppose so.'

'Someone said something like: "We've had enough!" '

Miss Hazlewood considered. 'I think Terry was being rude to Walt, and then Leonard got up and said something of the sort.'

'After which the row began.'

'Yes . . . that started it. Leonard isn't a man to tolerate rudeness. Then Tom weighed in, and Terry picked it up. And Leonard said it was time for a showdown.'

'And the doctor meanwhile . . . ?'

'He didn't say anything.' Her peaky face was thoughtful. 'He's my uncle, you know – sort of. He's the one who runs the Quartet. But I don't remember him saying anything at all, which is unusual for him. Perhaps he thought Leonard was doing all right as spokesman. Anyway, this time he kept out of it.'

'It developed between Leonard Meares and Virtue.'

‘Well . . . Tom was giving Leonard support. Tom has a hot temper. Once or twice I thought he was going to clout Terry.’ She covered her mouth. ‘I suppose I shouldn’t have said that! But nobody can suspect Tom of anything.’

Gently grunted. ‘Let’s stick to Meares! Did he happen to mention an understudy?’

Miss Hazlewood pouted for a moment. ‘Yes. Leonard did suggest it.’

‘What was Virtue’s response?’

‘He began to get nasty. He asked Leonard if he wanted trouble. He went up to him and stared him in the eyes.’ She shivered. ‘There was something really horrid about Terry.’

‘He was threatening Meares?’

‘Yes. Tom was getting ready to intervene. But Leonard just stayed cool and contemptuous and refused to let Terry provoke him.’

‘Virtue’s actual words were: did Meares want trouble?’

‘Yes. He kept repeating them in an unpleasant way. Leonard said he thought that was Terry’s problem, but Terry kept staring at him and asking the same thing. And then I chipped in.’ She jigged her shoulders. ‘That probably didn’t help matters! And Tom was chivvying Walt about replacing Terry – and poor Walt was almost in tears.’

‘What did Virtue do then?’

‘He got ready to leave.’

‘And Meares?’

‘Leonard didn’t say any more. After that it was a row between Terry and Walt, with Terry behaving like a street lout.’ Her mouth quivered. ‘It was ugly and vicious. Poor Walt didn’t have any defence. Terry was mocking him, tearing him to pieces. If I’d been a man I’d certainly have hit him.’

‘Did no one try to stop him?’

She shook her head. ‘In the end, Tom threatened to break his neck. But it was too late then. He’d made a jelly of Walt, and said things that could never be forgiven.’

‘Things about another man, for instance.’

‘Yes.’ Miss Hazlewood grimaced her distaste.

‘At that moment, who was Virtue looking at?’

‘Who?’ Her greenish eyes were round.

The amplifying system gave a sudden wail and Miss Hazlewood jerked up straight in her pew. The loudspeakers cleared their corporate throat and announced apologetically: ‘Testing, one, two, three . . .’ Then came harsh gritting and a faint ‘Fred, try that one . . .’ before a fruity cough ended the broadcast. Miss Hazlewood started up.

‘I must go to see to them—!’

‘Please sit down, Miss Hazlewood.’

‘But I really have told you everything now . . .’

‘I think you can spare us a little longer.’

Resentfully she plumped down again, kicking at a hassock that impeded her feet. Her sharp, small features had an obstinate set and she fretted at her skirt with a finger.

‘Well it was Leonard – if you must know! He seemed to have it in particularly for him. I thought he was doing it deliberately to make mischief between Leonard and Walt. But Walt didn’t notice. He was too upset. All he had eyes for was Terry. And Terry said it could be any one of us, or even a girl – looking at me.’

‘Did Meares make any response?’

‘Of course not. Simply stared back at Terry with contempt.’

‘What about the others?’

‘When Terry hinted at me was when Tom told him to clear out.’

‘And then he went?’

‘Yes – because Tom would have thrown him out if he hadn’t. Tom’s as gentle as a kitten really, but he won’t stand people insulting women.’

She broke off to stare at an electrician who was trailing a cable down the aisle. The man looped it round a pillar, grinned, and went on his way.

‘Tell me what was said after Virtue left.’

‘What? We had to rally round Walt, of course. Uncle Henry principally – he’s a doctor, so he’s rather good at it.

‘He was trying to persuade him to carry on.’

‘He told him that the part was bigger than the player. That he owed it to music, that sort of thing. He bullied him a bit – but then, he had to.’

‘Was the understudy mentioned?’

‘I don’t think so. At least, not in Walt’s hearing. Tom thought that Walt would come round and carry on, but Uncle Henry wasn’t so certain. Obviously Walt couldn’t go home. Uncle Henry offered to put him up. Walt decided he needed to be alone and went off, and Uncle Henry let him.’

‘And then?’

‘That’s about it.’ She flicked a thread from her skirt. ‘Uncle Henry and Tom went for a drink. Leonard and I preferred to go.’

‘Together . . . of course.’

‘Yes.’ Her finger raked across the material. ‘I take it you’re not suggesting that I had anything to do with what happened.’

Gently’s face was bland. ‘Did you?’

Her body jerked. ‘No, I didn’t! Good lord, you’ve only to ask Leonard. He can tell you I went straight home.’

‘Because he went with you?’

‘I – no!’ Blush spots appeared under her eyes. ‘As a matter of fact I did offer him a lift, but he said he’d rather walk.’

‘You usually gave him a lift?’

‘Yes – sometimes. Mostly I suppose, if it comes to that!’

‘But not on Tuesday.’

‘Look, I went straight home. Ask Daddy and Mummy – they’ll tell you.’

Gently considered the small, flushed face. ‘What reason did he give – for forgoing your company?’

‘I didn’t need a reason. We were all upset. I was glad to be alone, too.’

‘He simply said, Not tonight, Laurel.’

‘Oh my goodness!’ Her eyes were fierce. ‘If you must know he said he’d sooner walk because he had a call to make on his way home.’

‘A call to make . . .’

‘Yes! Just ask him, he’ll tell you it’s true.’

‘Then he wouldn’t have seen you leave.’

‘Yes – I passed him.’

‘Where?’

‘At the bottom of Saxton Road.’

Gently’s expression was incredulous. ‘That’s convenient, Miss Hazlewood, but

Saxton Road isn't on his way home.'

'I don't *care*. It's where I saw him. And he waved, so I know he recognized me.'

'And you of course recognized him.'

'Yes, I did.' Her flush deepened. 'We all know Leonard – Mummy, Daddy. He's been a friend of ours for years.'

'It was Leonard Meares – down to his clothes.'

'If you like, I can describe them. They were plain in my headlights – a light grey jacket, dark slacks and sandals. Now try to tell me it wasn't him!'

Gently didn't try to tell her. He leaned against the plinth of the war memorial and listened for a moment to the bustle of the church.

'Had Virtue no friends in your little group?'

Miss Hazlewood was regarding him pinkly. She had picked up a prayer book from the shelf and was riffling the pages with her thumb. She sat very straight. Her small, light body looked almost like a child's in the vastness of the pew.

'Of course he didn't.' Her voice was cross. 'People like that don't have friends.'

'Still, you'd been rehearsing for several weeks. He couldn't have been offensive all the time.'

'Nobody liked him, just the same.'

'He was tolerated because of Mr Hozeley.'

She stubbed the hassock. 'More or less. Though naturally, we tried to keep things smooth.'

'I can imagine the doctor viewing him with detachment.'

'Oh yes . . . Uncle Henry. Terry was a clinical case to him, he rather enjoyed having him around.' She punished the hassock. 'Tom couldn't stand him, and I found it hard to be polite. Leonard did his best, but even he had to make a stand on Tuesday.'

'Before that he'd tried to ingratiate Virtue?'

She frowned and toyed with the prayer book. 'Leonard's a gentleman, of course, he's nice to everyone. But sometimes I felt he went too far.'

Gently said smoothly: 'Virtue was homosexual. He probably needed an effusive approach. More as though he were a girl than a man. Isn't that the sort of thing you mean?'

'Yes – that's precisely it! I expect that's why it seemed overdone.'

'Mr Meares may have judged more shrewdly than yourself.'

'He saw Terry as a girl . . . yes, that would explain it.' She sat prodding the hassock yet further, her eyes wide and suddenly absent. The prayer book, a limp-covered edition, was curled almost double in her grasp.

'And Terry . . . he'd react like a girl with anyone.'

'The doctor believes he was bisexual.'

'I mean, if he met another young man he'd be attracted and might make a pass.'

Gently paused. 'Do you know such a person?'

'No . . . I was thinking of a joke of Leonard's. Once, when Terry and Walt weren't hitting it off, Leonard said they must have quarrelled about the gardener. Everyone laughed, including me. But I didn't really get the point at the time.'

'The gardener – David Crag?'

'Yes, young Dave. Oh, but Leonard wasn't being serious! They were always joking about Terry and Walt – and waiters and choir boys. You know.'

‘A form of wit that appealed to Mr Meares.’

‘Well . . . Leonard does have a dry sense of humour.’ She reddened. ‘He – he can be whimsical. But there’s never any offence in it.’

‘And – on Tuesday – there was joking of this sort?’

‘Good lord no.’ Her chin came up. ‘Nobody was joking then, I can tell you. It was plain from the start that something was up.’

‘A tense atmosphere . . .’

‘Yes.’

‘Brought at last to a head by Mr Meares.’

‘Yes – someone had to say something! And Uncle Henry wasn’t taking the lead.’

‘Thank you, Miss Hazlewood.’

She stared in surprise. ‘I can go now?’

‘You may go.’

She hesitated, then rose clumsily, fumbling the prayer book back on its shelf. The loudspeakers chose that moment to boom and behind the memorial someone coughed.

They picked their way down the cluttered church and emerged into the shade of the limes. While they were absent a banner had gone up: Moura Lympany plays Beethoven. Beyond the church stretched a park-like graveyard uniformly set with grey, pointed-topped gravestones. They stood in ranks like old grey men, facing east and the curtain of sea.

‘Wait,’ Gently said.

They waited. Footsteps approached from the church. William Crag, his round face shining, angrily placed himself in front of them.

‘Now – my gentlemen!’

Gently gazed at him. ‘Were you able to hear what was said . . . ?’

‘Never mind about that! I’m the verger here, I’ve a right to know what goes on in my church. I want a word with you two gentlemen.’

‘This seems as cool a spot as any.’

‘Yes, and with as many long ears wagging! My business is private, even if yours isn’t.’

He jerked his head for them to follow and stumped off round the church. At the east end, now in shade, grew two hollies with ripening berries. Crag tramped on to peer round the corner, then returned to the shade of the hollies: a humpty, sturdy figure, clad in black trousers and a twill shirt.

‘Now there’s three things I’m going to tell you, and the first is this here.’

The face turned towards them was oddly medieval with its deep upper lip and broad, round chin.

‘That was a lie about my boy – an evil lie by an evil mind! There’s been none of that sort of game with Dave, and I shall tell Mr Meares so to his face. And how do I know?’ His curved eyebrows wrinkled high over staring, flat-grey eyes. ‘I know because I used to work for Mr Hozeley, and I trusted him with Dave because I knew I *could* trust him!’

Gently winnowed the air with his hat. ‘That doesn’t apply to Mr Hozeley’s late guest.’

‘It doesn’t have to apply to him. Dave scarcely clapped eyes on him, all the time he was there. That young devil never rose before noon, when Dave was away to his

lunch, and after that they were either playing music or off out in the car, and that most of the time.' He spat with feeling. 'It's a wicked lie, and that's the first thing I have to say.'

'What's the second thing?'

'I'm coming to it.' He turned his moonish face on

Leyston. 'The second is this. I won't have my boy being bullied and upset by any policemen.'

Leyston's face was hot. 'Who says he was bullied?'

'Me – I'm saying it.' Crag's chin jutted out. 'He was well-nigh in tears when he came in to lunch, you calling him a liar and the rest.'

'But I didn't call him a liar.'

'No – not you.'

'Now you listen to me!' Leyston snapped. 'I don't care if your boy's the Archbishop, I'm going to find out if he's telling me the truth.'

'Dave isn't a liar.'

'That's what you say!'

'And aren't I the one who knows?' Crag demanded. 'Wasn't it me who brought him up from a shaver, after he lost his daddy at sea?' His large mouth tightened for an instant. 'So I know – I'm telling you,' he said. 'Dave is a decent, God-fearing boy, not like most of the young devils these days. He's straight. If he tells you something you can rely on it for gospel-truth. And if he says he saw a man on Monday, then he saw him, and that's that.'

'So why couldn't he pick out his picture?' Leyston growled.

'Because you never showed it to him – that's why! And if you'd half the brains you were born with you'd be out now looking for someone else.'

'Just on his word.'

'That's all you need.'

Leyston snorted his disbelief. He stood staring hard-eyed at the obstinate face that stared so uncompromisingly into his.

'And the third thing . . . ?' Gently murmured.

'Yes – the third thing,' Crag said. He broke off his seance with Leyston to dart quick glances right and left. He drew closer to Gently. 'Now me, I'm not a vindictive man,' he said. 'Strict I may be – I'm ready to admit it – but nobody ever called me vindictive.' He paused to stare the point home. 'But that was a wicked thing to say about Davey! I should never have thought it of Mr Meares, who always gives the impression of an upright man. He comes to service here – has a regular pew – always a pound note on the plate! But there you are. There's whited sepulchres in Shinglebourne, like other places.'

'So what are you saying?'

'I'm saying this here.' His eyes were staring like two grey pebbles. 'Next time you see him, ask Mr Meares what he was doing down the shingle denes on Saturday.'

Leyston grunted disgust. 'We know what he'd be doing! He goes down there to watch the birds.'

'And right you are – so just you ask him what birds he was watching on Saturday!' Crag eased back, his eyes glinting. 'About three o'clock time,' he said. 'I was walking my dog round the old tower, and you can see plenty from up there.'

'What did you see?'

'I saw him. He was strolling along under the denes – got his glasses round his

neck, and upping them every so often. So then he comes to a standstill, and this time he isn't upping his glasses – because why? Because he's just met someone who's stepped out from amongst the marrams.'

'Who?'

'The one you're here about.'

'Virtue?'

'That's what I'm saying. Nor I didn't need any glasses to see it was him. Wearing a poncy shirt he was, and a pair of drawers only halfway decent – he'd been lying down among the marrams, I reckon, and just got up when he saw Mr Meares.'

'You're making this up!' Leyston snapped.

Crag eyed him fiercely. 'Don't you come it – not with me, in my own churchyard. What I'm telling you is what I saw.'

'Go on,' Gently said.

'Then they had a palaver,' Crag said. 'Mr Meares standing there like he'd taken root, and this limb of Satan prancing round him. Oh, I could see what he was up to, even a couple of hundred yards off. Then they went behind the marrams and didn't come out. And I came away.'

'Was nobody else there?'

'Not that I saw. And I could see a fair distance.'

'There'd be racing going on!' Leyston fumed. 'There'd be dozens of people down there.'

'No there wasn't. Not on the denes.'

'You're trying to make something out of nothing!'

Crag took a step backwards and gazed at the local man with contempt that was monumental. 'So you ask him, my gentleman,' he said. 'You state the time and the place, and ask him. Say you've got a witness who was up at the tower and saw what happened, and ask him. Never mind what you think of me, just you get Mr Meares – and ask him.'

'Thank you,' Gently said. 'We'll probably do that.'

'And it better hadn't be a fairy tale!' Leyston snarled.

Crag looked him up and down then spat into the hollies. He stumped away round the church.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LEYSTON'S EYES POPPED after the retreating figure.

'That was all a con, sir!' he burst out.

Gently, stuffing his pipe with Erinmore, shrugged and looked round for a seat. He found one: an ancient tombstone from which the inscription had long been erased. Tiny blue butterflies danced near it, their colours seeming faded by the heat.

'Weren't you saying that Crag wouldn't stoop to it?'

'So I was wrong, sir. He's as bad as the rest.'

'Then it could have been he who inspired his grandson's story.'

Leyston glowered between his sideboards, his mouth small.

Gently lit up and blew smoke at the butterflies, who gave ground but continued their waltzing. 'I think perhaps you were right the first time. Crag may be a hypocrite, but I doubt if he's a liar.'

'But he was twisting it – it could all have been innocent.'

'I thought his account was fairly objective.'

'They might just have gone off to look at something – perhaps Virtue was showing him a nest.'

'At the back end of August?'

'Well . . . I don't know, sir!'

Leyston plumped down on the other end of the tombstone. He sat, forlorn in his waistcoat, gazing at the dust on his black shoes.

Gently shaped a smoke-ring. 'Our cello gives a twang whenever we touch him . . . he's in tune. The rest of the ensemble are merely putting up a discord.'

'Sir . . . ?'

'It's a matter of motive, of someone wanting Virtue dead. Not beaten up and run out of town, but dead and silent – like this tombstone.' He rapped it with his knuckles. 'Meares is our candidate. Every note from him rings true.'

Leyston heeled the dust, 'There's still Hozeley. He had a personal motive too.'

'Not for killing. Virtue's talent would always protect him with Hozeley.'

'The doctor, then.'

'He's too clever.'

'He could have set on Friday, sir.'

'He'd have been too clever for that too. And Friday would never have picked up a flint.'

Leyston dug more dust. 'Then . . . we get him?'

Gently nodded through his smoke. 'A chat in your office to begin with. We can take it from there.'

'What shall I tell him, sir?'

Gently puffed. 'That I've got some queries about his statement.' He slid Leyston a look. 'And get some men on the ground looking for corroboration of Crag's story.

Was there racing on Saturday, by the way?'

Leyston swallowed. 'Yes, sir.'

'Then you'll know where to start. We want the full orchestra. There's no room for a slip-up on this one.'

Someone had dug up an old fan, an antique in its own right, and stood it on a filing cabinet to provide the office with an illusion of coolness. It clicked and creaked arthritically as it tilted on its axis and, perversely, seemed to accentuate the sooty smell in the room. In the corner, a WPC sat grinding pencils in a sharpener. Through the sash window, jammed up with a ruler, one could hear cars passing below. And one was conscious of footfalls in the passage, doors closing, muffled voices and, from the MT yard at the rear, sounds of an engine being revved. Familiar sounds in a familiar setting: and building up to a familiar moment.

'This way, sir.'

His elbows on the desk, Gently watched Meares come through the door. The entry was casual, perhaps too casual, and the glance round the office too-carefully controlled. But he advanced with confidence.

'Chief Superintendent Gently . . . ?'

He was a dark-haired man of forty-five, with brown eyes, a sallow complexion and shapely, square-cut features. About five feet ten, he wore a light worsted two-piece and a cream shirt, open at the neck.

'You have some business with me?'

'Please sit down.'

His manner was pitched between friendly and curt. The moustache was a clipped toothbrush, exactly complementing his face.

'I would take it as a favour if you could keep this short. Because of holidays I'm short of staff.'

'Naturally, Mr Meares.'

'It involves extra appointments . . . shall I sit here?'

'Please do.'

The chair had been placed in the centre of the floor, facing the desk and the window. Meares took no notice of its prominent position but sat readily, as though keen to get on. His eye strayed momentarily to the stenographer, who had turned over a leaf of her pad; then he folded his hands attentively. Over by the door, Leyston took a chair.

'Just a few points of confirmation.' Gently's tone was studiedly neutral. 'We're trying to form a picture of the deceased . . . who he knew, how he spent his time.'

Meares nodded shortly. 'I understand.'

'You were friends with him, I believe.'

'I . . . wouldn't put it as strongly as that. We had limited contact at rehearsals.'

'But you were more friendly than most?'

'No. I can't accept that.'

'You made a point of including him in conversation – buying him drinks, that sort of thing.'

'Well . . . !' Meares flickered a smile. 'He was never very popular with the Quartet. But Walt insisted on having him in, so we couldn't very well send him to Coventry.'

'You did your best with an awkward customer.'

‘I suppose you could say that.’

‘Who – because of his inversion – needed special handling?’

‘It . . . wasn’t a factor one could overlook.’

Gently gestured carelessly. ‘Though of course, with that sort, there’s always the danger of being misunderstood. They are used to being repulsed, so that any show of friendliness is likely to encourage them. It might also look suspicious to other people. But that was a risk you had to take.’

Meares’s hands changed position slightly. ‘Has some suggestion like that been made?’

‘No . . . nothing, really! It’s much the same wherever homosexuals are involved. They tend to arouse hostility and exaggerated suspicions. It’s enough to drink with one, to be seen in his company, to set a dozen tongues wagging.’

Meares hesitated. ‘Then . . . that would account for any idle talk that’s gone about. Certainly I bought him an occasional drink and tried to treat him as a human being.’

‘In a way you’d feel sorry for him.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘He was not to blame for his nature.’

Meares said carefully: ‘I believe it is accepted that such a condition is involuntary.’

‘And meanwhile, apart from that, Virtue was quite a likeable fellow. He was, for example, a well-favoured young man whom it was not displeasing to have around.’

‘In a way . . . that was true.’

‘He was slim, and graceful.’

‘There was nothing clumsy about him.’

‘A caressing, affectionate manner.’

Meares moved his head in brief assent.

‘But . . . except at rehearsals . . . you saw little of him?’

Meares considered the point politely. ‘Other than passing him in the street, I think I only saw him at Walt’s cottage.’

‘You saw him there?’

‘I could scarcely avoid it. The initial rehearsals took place at the cottage. Walt first showed the *Quintet* to Dr Capel and myself and then we rehearsed it while Walt made revisions.’

‘So you became a familiar visitor at the cottage?’

‘To a certain extent, yes.’

‘You would see Virtue there on a more social basis?’

‘The setting was less formal than the Music Room.’

‘But otherwise . . . only when passing.’

Meares’s hands changed position again. ‘Actually, that was quite rarely, because of his special relationship with Walt. In so many words, Walt was jealous. He did his best to keep Terry to himself. It was a policy which Terry found irksome, and which I’m certain led to the trouble on Tuesday.’

Gently nodded. ‘Terry was bidding for independence.’

‘Yes. He wanted to break free from Walt. As I read it he intended to leave the cottage and set up by himself somewhere else.’

‘That was actually mentioned?’

Meares checked. ‘At least, I received that impression.’

‘But . . . would that have been a possible course, when his only support came from Mr Hozeley?’

Meares's shoulders moved. 'I may have been misled. Things are said in the heat of the moment. Or Terry may have felt he could rely on Walt even if he asserted his independence.'

'Or perhaps he had some other iron in the fire.'

'If he did I could not say what. But the outburst was emotional and confused, it would be unwise to interpret it too strictly.'

'Yes . . . unwise.' Gently's hand dismissed it. 'And for this reason – Hozeley's jealousy – you saw Terry infrequently.'

'Very infrequently. He was rarely allowed down town on his own.'

'Yet sometimes he must have escaped, naturally.'

'No doubt he did whenever he could.'

'Those, of course, are the times that interest us. Especially the occasions of recent date.'

Meares was silent.

'Can you help us there?'

'I am . . . trying to remember when I last saw him out.'

'Within the last few days,' Gently said. 'Let's take an example. Last weekend.'

Meares shook his head. 'No. I'm pretty certain.'

'Or narrow it down,' Gently said. 'Saturday.'

'I'm afraid I can't help you.'

'The afternoon.'

'No.'

'At around 3 p.m.'

Meares continued to shake his head in a silence broken only by the creaking of the fan. The PCW's pencil had ceased to drive and she sat gazing at her pad. Leyston was visibly holding his breath. Gently steepled his fingers, and considered them.

'Of course, we have a special reason for mentioning that time. We have information that Virtue was out on his own and we are trying to pinpoint his movements. Wouldn't you have called at Friday's that day, for instance?'

Meares moistened his lips. 'No.'

'You have a yacht there, haven't you, that he's repairing?'

'Yes . . . but it wasn't towed in till Monday morning.'

'All the same, you were in the neighbourhood?'

'No. I wasn't there on Saturday.'

'Not down at the south end . . . the yacht club?'

'No. I was birdwatching – on the heath.'

'The heath . . . ?'

'Yes – the heath.' Meares conjured a weak smile. 'I'm – well – Mr Birdwatcher, I suppose! I run the local ornithological society.'

'And you were on the heath?'

'Yes . . . behind the town. I was there all Saturday afternoon. But it was too hot for birdwatching, really – they were fighting fires, further over.'

'You were there with some colleagues?'

'Actually – alone.'

'But you saw other people on the heath?'

'No – that's not the object of the exercise! One goes alone to see the birds.'

'Nobody saw *you*?'

Meares gestured apologetically. ‘Unless they saw me without my knowing it. But of course I kept away from the footpaths. I was over by the birches, actually.’

Gently clicked his tongue. ‘That’s disappointing! We hoped you were birdwatching somewhere else. Say on the shingle dunes, south of the town, just a bit beyond the Martello Tower. You didn’t work round there?’

Meares tried to smile again. ‘No, I assure you! Nowhere near it.’

‘Then it wasn’t you who was seen there?’

‘It couldn’t have been.’

‘By someone at the tower?’

‘No. Quite impossible!’

Gently shrugged. ‘A pity! You could have helped to place Virtue for us. He was seen disappearing into the marrams with a birdwatcher said to resemble you. But of course – it wasn’t.’

Meares shook his head while clinging to the tatters of his smile.

Gently collapsed his steeple, let his hands take up a praying position. ‘Let’s see if we can be luckier on a less-debatable occasion! After Tuesday’s rehearsal you left the Music Room in the company of Miss Hazlewood. You declined her offer of a lift and were passed by her in Saxton Road. Is that your way home?’

‘Well . . . no!’ Meares’s hands had coupled together with a jerk.

‘So?’

‘I – I had some idea . . . my cashier lives in Saxton Road.’

‘What about him?’

‘Well . . . a point of business! Something I’d forgotten to check.’

‘That isn’t what you told Inspector Leyston.’

‘No . . . because it wasn’t . . . didn’t seem important!’ His shoulders writhed. ‘I’d got this tummy bug – it had been bothering me all day. Then it suddenly struck when I left the rehearsal, when I was on my way to Maxwell’s. I simply had to find a toilet.’

‘So you returned to The White Hart.’

‘No—!’

‘Wasn’t that the nearest toilet?’

‘Not from where I was.’

‘Near the Tunstall Road junction?’

‘I didn’t stop to consider . . . I just went!’

‘Where?’ Gently said.

‘To the public toilet on the Front. Near the Moot House.’

‘Which is beyond the hotel.’

Meares hugged his hands. ‘I didn’t think . . . I simply made for it!’

Gently dipped his fingers. ‘Doubtless understandable! We’ve all been caught short now and then. And of course you’d prefer the anonymity of a public toilet to exhibiting your distress in the hotel. Nobody did see you, did they?’

‘Well – at the time – you wouldn’t expect . . .’

‘No of course not! And for the next half-hour, no question about your movements.’

Meares’s head drooped. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I realize you don’t find this satisfactory. But I can give you no other account. It must stand without corroboration.’

Gently studied him over his fingers. ‘And yesterday,’ he said. ‘Yesterday

morning?'

'I went to consult Dr Capel. Isn't that what you'd expect me to do?'

'You went without an appointment and stayed for an hour.'

'I happen to be a friend and a private patient.'

'But . . . for an hour?'

'It wasn't for an hour! We may have briefly discussed what happened that evening.'

'It was so important that Capel held up surgery?'

'There were . . . things that had to be decided. We'd lost our soloist. Walt was upset. Something had to be done to save the performance.'

'Still . . . for an hour?'

Meares's hands twisted. 'Naturally we wanted to go over it again! It had been a shock, we wanted to understand it, how it had come to blow up like that.'

'You wanted to explain to him your part in it.'

'Mine . . . ?'

'The doctor would be curious, surely. When the man who previously had been so friendly towards Virtue turned against him and provoked a crisis.'

Meares stared, his colour changing. 'But that's . . . a travesty of the facts!'

'Wasn't it you who first took exception to Virtue's antics? Who brought up the idea of an understudy?'

'I – I deny that!'

'But we've chapter and verse for it. You weren't being Virtue's friend that night. Something had changed. When the moment came, it was you who were first into the attack.'

'I categorically deny that!'

Gently grunted. 'And what you'd have to explain to the doctor was this: when Virtue outfaced you with threats and shut you up, what could the substance of those threats have been?'

For the second time Meares took refuge in silence and allowed the fan to come into its own. His mouth slightly parted, his handsome cheeks pale, he sat slumped and gazing, his breathing unsteady. Was he beginning to guess that these were opening shots only in a campaign that might stretch to days, and that every position he had seemingly defended would come under attack again and again? The policewoman knew. She was making use of the interval to give her hand a gentle massage. And Leyston knew, squatting on his chair, staring at the buff lino and nothing. A slow destruction . . . with chummie's lies getting thinner every time he was made to repeat them. And the heat for a bonus: now his face had a nervous glimmer of sweat.

'Let's look at it another way.'

Meares started slightly, his moist fingers seeking a fresh grip.

'Virtue had had enough of being Hozeley's protégé. He'd decided to opt for independence.'

'That was only my . . . impression.'

'He was sick of Hozeley's jealousy, of being chaperoned day and night, and an attempt to get money out of Hozeley failed. Hozeley was infatuated but he wasn't stupid.'

'I – I didn't know about that.'

'Didn't know that Virtue was a blackmailer?'

Gently's stare was encouragingly mild, but Meares's gaze faltered, dropped to the desk.

'No . . .'

'Oh yes. Virtue had tried these tricks before. But he must have found Hozeley an unsatisfactory mark, with his jealous vigilance and tight purse-strings. So Virtue decided to cut his losses and on Tuesday he gave Hozeley the push. But before he could do that he would need to have found a fresh mark, one who didn't have Hozeley's disadvantages. Wouldn't you say that followed?'

'I suppose it's . . . possible.'

'Knowing Virtue, I'd say it was certain! He'd have a man lined up who couldn't keep such a check on him, and from whom it would be easier to extort ready cash.'

'If he was indeed a blackmailer . . .'

'So who would he pick?'

'I – I'm not sure I understand . . .'

'Think about it,' Gently said. 'It isn't difficult. You only have to see it from Virtue's point of view. He would want a man who was vulnerable – wouldn't that be the first requirement? A man with something to lose – a marriage, friends, a place in society, a reputation.'

'Perhaps . . . that's who he'd choose.'

'And then, in the second place, a man of substantial income – because it's no use putting the bite on a man with a thin wallet! In the third place he'd need a man who was susceptible, whom he'd reason to believe he could seduce – and if that man was on short emotional rations it would put the cream on him – as a mark!' Gently leered confidentially. 'That's the recipe. Now let's see whom it might fit. Take Dr Capel, for example. He seems to have certain qualifications.'

Meares jacked himself straighter. 'I won't discuss it!'

'I realize that you and he are bosom friends. But perhaps you're right – the doctor strikes one as being too cautious for such a trap. How about Friday?'

'This is mere hypothesis—!'

'Friday has a strongly emotional nature.'

'I won't sit listening to it!'

'I think there's a case there . . . Friday doesn't have a sound alibi, either.'

'This way, you could implicate half of Shinglebourne.'

'Just Virtue's immediate connection,' Gently said. 'I don't think we need go beyond it. One or other will be the man we are seeking.' He paused; then shook his head. 'No. We'll have to pass Friday, too. He's tempting, but he doesn't have a handle – no reputation at stake, no marriage to threaten. The doctor comes closest to the specification . . . and possibly he'd have seen the most of Virtue.'

Meares pulled out a handkerchief and patted his face: but the set of his mouth was becoming stubborn. Deliberately, he wiped his hands before tucking the handkerchief away.

'All this . . . it won't get you anywhere, you know.'

Gently leaned back and gazed at his man.

'There's nothing you can prove against – any of us! Friday, the doctor or myself. You've checked our statements. You can't disprove them. The rest is hypothesis and suspicion. Now you're reduced to a – a charade, trying to force us into admissions! Well, it won't work. We're no fools: surely you must realize that by now. And I for one have no more time to help you spin out a pointless inquiry . . .'

Gently heard him out unmoved. ‘Let’s come to another matter, then.’

‘What other matter?’

‘Your cello, and why you left it behind on Tuesday.’

‘My cello . . . !’

Gently nodded. ‘I’m told you were in the habit of taking it home. Yet on Tuesday, with further rehearsals in doubt, you left it in the Music Room. Why?’

Meares gaped and his eyes looked sick, but at that moment there came a tap on the door. A plain-clothes man entered to hold a whispered conversation with Leyston. Leyston listened, his eyes hard, then he rose from his chair.

‘Sir . . .’

Gently followed him out.

‘Sir, we can place Mr Meares on the dunes on Saturday. One of his own staff was at the yacht club and saw him go by at about ten to three. A Herbert Cartwright.’ Leyston’s mouth quivered. ‘And a couple of witnesses saw Virtue on the dunes. Wearing the clothes described by Crag. They saw Crag too, walking his dog.’

Gently’s eyes glinted. ‘A full hand . . . ! Can you lay on a warrant if we need one?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Set it up then.’

He returned to the office and the grim-faced Meares.

‘Now . . . Mr Meares.’

‘I can explain about the cello—!’

‘Oh . . . we’ll leave that for the moment. As a matter of fact, something fresh has turned up. It relates to a man called Herbert Cartwright.’

‘Cartwright?’

‘You know him, of course?’

Meares stared. ‘I should do. He’s my employee.’

‘Then we ought to be able to believe him if he says he saw you on Saturday . . . at ten minutes to three?’

‘He – he saw me . . . ?’

‘So he says. Going past the yacht club towards the dunes. But of course he may have been mistaken, since you said you were . . . where was it? On the heath?’

Meares’s face jerked away abruptly: he sat staring at the chair vacated by Leyston. One of his hands, like a burrowing animal, clutched at the change in his trouser-pocket.

‘I – I can explain that!’

‘I wish you would.’

‘Yes – I seem to have been in error! With all that’s happened since the weekend . . . it must have got confused in my mind.’

Gently glanced at the shorthand-writer. ‘So . . . ?’

It was – it was Sunday when I went on the heath. Not Saturday, but Sunday. Of course, on Saturday I took a walk down the dunes.’

‘You are quite clear about this now?’

‘Yes – yes. Quite clear.’

‘Then our witness who saw you on the dunes with Virtue would not have been mistaken.’

‘Yes . . . no – I mean, he *was* mistaken!’

‘But we have corroboration that Virtue was there.’

‘I can’t help it. I didn’t see him. I saw nobody on the dunes.’

Gently's shoulders gestured. 'How wide is it there – the strip of land between the river and the sea? A hundred – perhaps a hundred-and-fifty – yards? How could you have missed him if he was there?'

'I did.'

'But how could you?'

'He may have been on the other side of the dunes . . .'

'You would not have been aware of him – you, a bird-watcher?'

'I don't *care*!' Meares burst out. 'I didn't *see* him.'

Gently took some prowling steps. 'Perhaps you really are confused,' he said. 'Perhaps your alibi for Tuesday is also misdated, and at the time you were somewhere else.'

'I absolutely deny that!'

'Then you can help us to prove it.'

'What—?'

'By assisting in a little routine. We shall need the clothes you were wearing that evening – purely for corroborative reasons, of course!'

'And . . . if I refuse?'

'Why should you? It would put us to the trouble of collecting a search warrant.'

Meares sat very still, his expression tight, his breath coming quick and short.

They didn't need the warrant. Driven by Leyston, they proceeded to Meares's house in Friston Road: an agreeable example of stockbroker's Tudor, with a view of the sea over the town roofs. Meares opened for them. They were met in the hall by a stoutly built lady with blue-rinsed hair. She came to a stand at a distance and stood surveying them with hostile eyes.

'What's this about, Leonard?'

Meares's smile was sickly. 'Just part of the investigation, my dear.'

'Who is this with Inspector Leyston?'

'He's . . . the man they've sent down from town.'

A formidable figure, she remained in the hall while Meares led them up the stairs, and her gorgon gaze was still on them as they crossed the galleried landing.

'This is my room.'

Of modest proportions, it looked out on a lawn and a coppice. On its walls hung original bird-paintings by Roland Green and Peter Scott. The limed oak furniture was solid, somewhere between period and modern: a spacious wardrobe, dressing table, tallboy, padded-top chest: and a single bed.

'Now let's see what you were wearing on Tuesday . . .'

With a sort of feeble defiance Meares pulled open the wardrobe. It exhaled a scent of lavender and exhibited a full rail of suits. Hesitating, he selected a cream tussore jacket and matching slacks, and threw them on the bed. Then, from a shelf below, he took a pair of Italian basket-work shoes.

'The shirt, I'm afraid, has gone to be washed.'

'Might it not still be in that chest . . . ?'

Sulkily, Meares went to the chest and fished out a crumpled poplin shirt.

'Socks . . . ?'

'If you must!' He found a pair.

'Pants . . . ?'

With an awkward jerk he threw them on the pile. 'And that's it?'

‘That’s it.’ He stood sullenly by the bed, his mouth drawn small.

Gently nodded gravely. ‘Still . . . simply for purposes of comparison!’ From the chest he took the remaining soiled underwear and dumped it on the bed. ‘Then a suit . . .’ He selected a hanger draped with a light grey jacket and charcoal slacks. ‘And shoes . . .’ There was one pair of sandals: he placed them beside the Italian confectionery. ‘You have no objections . . . ?’

Meares’s eyes were muzzy. ‘You . . . wish me to return with you to the station?’

Gently angled his shoulders. ‘Oh – I don’t think so. We can continue our chat tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow . . . ?’

‘It may be cooler. Just make your arrangements – to be available.’

They drove off with their haul in the boot. For a short distance Leyston was silent. Then, to the road ahead, he said mournfully:

‘That’s got to settle it, sir, him trying to snow us.’

Gently’s smile was distant. ‘Sometimes we win one.’

‘A spot of blood and we’ve got him, sir. Perhaps we ought to have had him back in, and let him sweat it out at the station.’

‘I think he’s better off sweating with Mrs Meares.’

‘Sir . . . ?’

‘And meanwhile I need a soak. Tell the doctor, if he asks for me, that he’ll find me at The White Hart.’

Leyston drove a few yards before echoing: ‘The doctor . . . ?’

Gently nodded to the windscreen. ‘Yes.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

LEYSTON HAD BEEN sufficiently provident to reserve a room at The White Hart: one of the best rooms, so that from his bath Gently could ponder the evening sea. Not that much came into view on those tired, grey miles, whose shallow corrugations were now beginning to be yellowed by the westering sun. Still it was luxury. Up to his chin, he considered the ocean's modest offering: two tiny vessels patrolling the horizon on courses that promised eventual collision. One was a long, low container ship, a shape almost without definition; the other a tall-stemmed tramp, its white-painted superstructure proud and distinct. Through the open window he watched them, while his water slowly cooled to tepid. They failed to collide: the spectacle lost interest. Regretfully, he heaved his dunked torso from the bath.

Next door the phone had remained silent . . . also a luxury, in its way! Yet he gave it a thoughtful stare as he emerged naked from the bathroom. Beside it there stood his tea tray, a mute witness of time passed, while his bath had taken almost an hour . . . He shrugged talcum, and began to dress.

Below they'd already started dinner and he was shown to the single table that Hozeley had occupied. No glamorous Rolls was parked out front in slots now covered by the hotel's shadow. The spite was going out of the sun, though still it glared on the Ruskinian Moot House: but this was the last flick of the whip. Soon, if not cool, they would at least be sunless.

'Soup, sir . . . ?'

'Just an iced lager.'

He tried to drink slowly but found himself gulping it. Around him the tables were filling with the same polyglot crowd as at lunch. A few of the women wore long evening dresses but most hadn't bothered. And the conversation was languid: even the Russian lady was brooding silently over her Martini.

'Dover sole, sir . . . ?'

But he couldn't face it and ordered salad again: crab, this time. It came with a tray of etceteras that he left barely touched. And, while he ate, the shadow on the Moot House grew sensibly higher, until only the glazed pantiles remained burnished and iridescent.

'They talk of rain on the way, sir.'

Gently eyed the waiter with small enthusiasm. 'They' had talked of rain on the way since April, but now, in August, who was believing them?

'We had a bit of overcast one day last week, sir. Perhaps we'll get a few drops soon.'

But he spoke to please: the nearest rain was doubtless that drenching the North Atlantic.

'Bring me an ice!'

He segmented it moodily, still eyeing each new-comer to the room. Also, outside,

the cars that were rapidly filling up the slots. On the Front pedestrians still loitered, seeking comfort in the onset of evening, and across the shingle two fishermen were feeding net into one of the boats. Yes . . . evening was coming: another spell of the sun had been endured.

'Coffee, sir . . . ?'

He grunted.

'Would it be cooler in the lounge?'

'Yes, sir. It's north-facing.'

'Bring it to me in there.'

He rose, collected his jacket, and passed through the double glass doors. The very faintest of faint breezes was creeping through the lounge's wide-set windows. He crossed to them. Alone in the room, a man sat reading an evening paper: now he folded it and, smilingly, gestured to the chair next to his.

'I've been talking to old Walt,' Capel smiled. 'You know, that man really is a marvel!'

Gently shrugged and accepted the chair, which had the advantage of facing the window.

'Has he returned to your place . . . ?'

'No – that's just it. He's been talking to me on the phone. He's decided to lay the ghost – his own words – by going straight back to live at the cottage. He's persuaded Butty, that's his housekeeper, to live in until after the Festival, by which time he estimates the ghost will have got tired of walking. Now what do you think of that?'

'I think that Hozeley's a man of character.'

'A survivor – what? But who could have guessed it from the state he was in, even this morning? Believe me he was in shock. I don't mind admitting that I had doubts if he would ever get over it. And now, like a phoenix arisen, he comes bounding back into the arena. Somehow it makes me feel terribly humble. Beside men like Walt, one is just an infant.'

'He was here for his lunch.'

Capel nodded. 'He told me. In fact, that was when the miracle seems to have happened. He spent an hour in the Music Room reliving it, compelling himself to face the truth. Glory be!' Capel's rectilinear features took on an awestruck expression. 'Think of what was going on through there – Walt Hozeley, wrestling with his soul!'

'Perhaps that's romanticising it a little.'

'Then this is a time to be romantic. Believe me, in my trade I see enough of people trying to come to terms with the unbearable. Mostly it's death, and you'd be surprised how little it seems to mean to most people – as though, in spite of all logic, they had a super-awareness that death is just a phase. But emotional disaster seems less endurable. It undermines the basic personality. If people succeed in clawing back to themselves it's a matter of months – not forty-eight hours.'

'This could be the first stage of reaction . . .'

Capel shook his head. 'Not with Walt. It's much more of a Zen response – he's turning his back, and walking on. Now, instead of wanting to scrub the performance, he's hell-bent on honouring our date. In fact, his only tragedy at the moment is that my man Davies won't arrive in time for a rehearsal this evening.'

Gently stared through the window. 'And that's your . . . only problem?'

‘You know it isn’t.’ Capel rustled his paper. I’ve had Leonard round to see me. It appears that now you’re trying to nobble our Cello.’ He gave a jerk of annoyance. ‘Why couldn’t that bloody fool, my gardener, have kept his mouth shut?’

The coffee came, and from nowhere the waiter spirited an extra cup. He made a gracious ritual of the pouring and dripped cream over the back of a spoon. Two more diners had drifted in, but they sought a settee across the room. The waiter, all smiles, gave a little bob before retiring.

They sipped coffee; Capel sighed.

‘Isn’t it a shame how the heat spoils the flavour? It’s a physiological thing, I think. The taste buds reject a substance unsuited to the local conditions. Tea isn’t so affected – tannic acid must meet the requirements better than caffeine.’

‘At the rehearsal,’ Gently said, ‘what was he wearing?’

Capel tilted his head. ‘Oh – you got the clothes right! The poor devil made a pass at conning you, but unluckily for him you were right on the button. No doubt you acquired the details from Laurel.’

‘Did Crag neglect to inform you about that?’

Capel grinned. ‘Old Bill was livid. It was naughty of Leonard to make jokes about Dave, and bound to raise the waters when Craggy heard of it. Dave is the apple of his eye, you know. He’s been brought up in the paths of righteousness. Bill loves him better than a son, and who offendeth Dave had better watch out.’

‘Are you suggesting that Crag slandered Meares?’

‘Good gracious no.’ Capel’s grin was broad. ‘You don’t know our Adam – he’s the conscience of Shinglebourne. It’s a frank to my character that he deigns to work for me.’

Gently sipped. ‘Meares denies it all.’

‘Wouldn’t you, with the law breathing down your neck?’

‘He was under no pressure when the subject was raised.’

‘That’s being naive – you’ve got us all under pressure.’

‘Yet . . . if he was innocent?’

Capel shook his head. ‘Poor old Leonard has too much to lose. What happened on the dunes could be as innocent as snow but still he would try to avoid admitting it. And really what does it amount to? He met Virtue. That seems to be the whole story. The rest is all Craggy’s dirty-mindedness, provoked by Leonard’s joke about Dave.’

‘It makes a link in a chain.’

‘Too circumstantial.’

‘Another link is his deception with the clothes.’

‘But – fair do’s – by then he was in a tizzy, and thinking his arrest was just around the corner.’ Capel glanced at another couple who had come in. ‘Look, you’re talking to a man who understands Leonard. Under all that phlegm he can easily be panicked into saying and doing the silly thing. He’s behaved suspiciously, that’s a fact, and you do quite right to follow it up. But look me in the eye and hear me telling you that, in his case, you’re being misled.’

‘Your faith in him is touching,’ Gently said.

‘Is there nothing I can say that will convince you?’

Gently hunched. ‘You could try a confession.’

Capel snatched his head and turned away.

Now there was quite a little influx of diners, spreading out to all corners of the

lounge. Waiters followed, and a party of four pulled up chairs to face the window. Capel gulped his coffee.

'We can't talk here – and there's a devil of a lot more I want to say.'

'What do you suggest?'

'How about a stroll – across the links to Gorse Cottage?'

Gently considered the proposition. Then he put down his cup and rose.

Capel led the way to a footpath that skirted the houses at the north end of the town. The sun, a malignant disc, still glared on the horizon ahead of them. To the right were marshes, veined by ditches exposing beds of cracked, dried mud and, more distantly, clustering under trees, the white walls of a village higher up the coast. Was it cooler now . . . ? Even the long shadows still seemed envelopes of heat. Dust and chaffy ends of grass kicked up as they strode along the path.

'My favourite walk,' Capel explained. 'Though usually it's muddy, along here.'

'It leads to Gorse Cottage . . . ?'

'More or less. After you cross the toe-end of the links.' He turned to slide Gently a grin. 'I suppose that's giving you some naughty thoughts! But frankly, the choice is quite innocent. We've only come here to be on our own.'

He loped ahead, a jerky figure, yet with an awkward grace in his stride; they crossed a plank bridge and came to a stile beyond which the path entered a meadow. At the stile Capel paused, his hand upon it.

'Were you serious when you suggested a confession?'

'Should I have been?'

'Well, I can't help wondering which way your ingenious ideas are straying! You've got old Leonard in a half-nelson, but you're not a man to take for granted. Perhaps you're just putting the screws on Leonard to see if you can make the other pips squeak. Isn't that possible?'

'You seem to think so.'

'After all, old Leonard is a moderate prospect. You must have met murderers enough in your time to know that his face doesn't fit the picture. Killing needs too much or too little imagination, and either way lets Leonard out. But Tom Friday and myself make the perfect combination. And you certainly won't have overlooked that.'

Gently shrugged. 'I've always preferred facts . . .'

'But psychology is a fact, too!'

'At the moment we have to regard it as secondary.'

Capel looked at him, sighed, then took a spring at the stile.

'Of course you know what I'm after, don't you?' he said, as they resumed their way, now side by side. 'I don't give a hoot who killed Virtue. My single-minded target is the performance on Saturday. We've got our understudy. Walt's bounced back. George V Hall is booked solid. But now the law is making passes at our good Cello, enough to throw Rostropovich off his stroke. Damn it, you're being anti-cultural, man! Couldn't it wait at least until after Saturday?'

Gently shook his head. 'I've no powers of postponement.'

'You could drag your feet – just a very little! It isn't as though nations hung on the upshot. The world is no worse for the loss of Terence Virtue.'

'Is that your opinion?'

'Absolutely. I'm quite willing to speak ill of the dead.'

'The *Quintet* is worth more than his dying.'

'Infinitely more – now that he's dead.' Capel waved a large hand. 'You can't cancel it, you know, and I'm sure you're above simple hypocrisy. Likely enough Virtue died as he lived, and that's an end. Music is for ever.'

'For music, I should interrupt the course of the law?'

'Till Sunday – and it's worth a brace of cops.'

'You know I can't do that.'

Capel worked his shoulders pettishly. 'Somehow you've *got* to see sense before Saturday!'

He strode on with his jerky lope over the wiry straw that had once been grass. Ahead, shrivelled trees netted the sun, breaking up its last spite into fiery stilettos. In the dusty sky no birds flew, no grasshoppers chirred in the swarf beneath. But, as they approached the trees, two bats took wing to flutter round them boldly.

'Did you check when I left The White Hart on Tuesday?'

'Inspector Leyston had already done so.'

'That's a pity – it doesn't help you. Though of course I was going spare after that.'

'You, but not Friday.'

Capel turned to smile. 'Only you can't be certain of that, can you? Tom has only his daughter to vouch for him, and she'd lie like a trooper for either one of us.'

'Do you want to bring Friday in?'

Capel chuckled. 'He's an option you'll have to keep open. He made no secret of his feelings about Virtue, and would have used a strong arm if I hadn't stopped him.'

'The motive isn't there.'

'That bothersome factor!' Capel gave a snatch of his head. 'But people get killed for no motive, you know. You mentioned manslaughter yourself.'

'Only Meares may have motive.'

'That's still guesswork.'

'The presumption is too strong to ignore.'

Capel bounced a few paces in silence, his slanting brow creased in a frown. 'What we need is a deep, dark motive that would have even me reaching for a blunt instrument. I did see quite a lot of Virtue, remember. He came to my house several times with Walt. And dear old Walt would never have suspected evil, even if I'd invited Virtue on his own.'

Gently gestured impatiently. 'We've been through all that.'

Capel raised his hand. 'But have you met my wife?'

'Your wife . . . ?'

'Tanya. I don't want to boast, but she's usually regarded as quite a peach.' He turned his Mephistophelean leer on Gently. 'You remember me telling you that Virtue was bisexual. You didn't ask me why I was so certain – and perhaps I wouldn't have told you, if you had.'

Gently hesitated. 'For that you'd take a . . . blunt instrument?'

Capel nodded. 'The first that came to hand. I love my wife. If Virtue had seduced her, somewhere, sometime, I would have killed him.'

They had come to a second stile; it admitted them to the golf links and the sweep of the heath. The sun had slipped finally beneath the horizon to leave the western sky in a lurid glow. But the glow was soiled. Mushroom pillars of smoke hung upon it right along the skyline with, at their feet, like lingering fragments of the sun, small bright

eyes of flame. And faintly one could smell smoke on the warm lifeless air.

'Our world's alight . . .'

Capel stood gazing on the other side of the stile, his gaunt face for once empty, the lips in a slack line.

'Leslie intends to go to Canada when he has qualified here. It's too late for me. My generation was the one that tried to sit tight and weather it. Only the ship has let us down. Now we're fit only for the burning.'

Gently, too, stood gazing. 'You seem to have weathered it pretty well . . .'

'I – yes!' Capel angled a shoulder. 'I dropped my line in a pleasant place. But that's a garrison town back there, a cell that still resists the creeping anaemia. The body is sick, the brain is tumoured. Leslie will go with my blessing.'

'Aren't you a diagnostician?'

Capel's mouth twisted. 'Who is in doubt about the disease? Plato left us an account of it, and Laotse before him. When the gods seek to destroy us they send us a madness called equality. We of course interpret it as uniformity, and then the vital structure of society fails. Men are unequal. There is more than education between a fitter and a physician. Not the opportunity of princes could turn me into a Walt Hozeley. But now we make it an article of faith: and wait for Plato's will to be done.'

'May not the disease be reversible?'

'Have you seen any signs of it slackening? Sometimes the patient has a better day, but that's usual in the course of a fatal illness. Soon now we may expect a crisis, and that will answer the question for us. Either the patient will get up and walk or he will exhibit total collapse.'

'And crime is one of the symptoms,' Gently said.

'Crime – like this one here.'

'A diminished regard for the sanctity of life.'

Capel stared at the flames and said nothing.

At last he shrugged impatiently and set off again, across the fawn desert of the links: here dotted with dark thickets of furze and the gaping pits of stony bunkers. The greens they passed were unwatered ruins. No member was playing an evening round. At a distance to the right the pleasant, white-painted clubhouse stood deserted, its car park empty.

Capel nodded to it. 'No more golf until the drought breaks,' he said.

'Meaning you meet few people this way.'

Capel summoned his leer. 'You'd be lucky to meet any.'

'So that, for an assignation . . . ?'

Capel strode on, his leer still visible. Now he had put on pace a little, as though having some fixed object in mind.

They came to the road and, crossing it, entered the lane to Gorse Cottage. Hozeley's Rolls was parked in his drive and a light was showing in a window. The varnished gate was swung back and jammed open with a new wooden wedge. Capel halted in the gateway and turned, confronting Gently.

'Isn't this the place?'

'It's the place.'

'And about the time?'

'About the time.'

Capel's expression was fiendish. 'The place, the time . . . and one, at least, of the men involved! You know, I think we ought to improve the occasion. Why don't we

reconstruct the crime?'

He had no humour in his eyes, standing there in Hozeley's gateway; their grey sparkle turned on Gently like a bright, thrusting probe. Gently returned the stare flatly.

'Do you think it will do any good?'

'Oh yes. I think there are features you could well have overlooked.'

'Which . . . ?'

'We don't know, do we? They will arise from the reconstruction. But I'm convinced that if we put it together a little spark of light may fall.'

Gently hunched. 'Better carry on, then!'

Capel leaned back against the gate. He rested his elbows on the bar and cocked one of his large feet.

'First, a preface about the row. That was a considered act by Virtue. He intended to cut the rehearsal short and to make certain that Walt stayed away from the cottage.'

'That's Hozeley's theory.'

'It's mine too, so you may as well take it as read. When Virtue left the Music Room on Tuesday he had something quite specific in mind. We can guess what it was – an assignation. He'd invited someone to the cottage. Only – and this is a point you may have overlooked! – the sex of that someone remains uncertain. It could have been a man, could have been a woman, and if the latter, she could have had a husband. And then you have a motive which, in my book, beats blackmail into a bran poultice.'

'A husband – like you.'

'Like me.' Capel's eyes were rock-steady. 'Especially remembering that Tanya had an alibi that would have covered her till past midnight.'

'May I take it that it was you?'

Capel didn't smile. 'I'm not in the market with a confession. But you can use my case as an example – there might well have been a husband around like me.' He hitched up on his elbows. 'So this way comes Virtue, just as dusk is becoming darkness. He's expecting to meet this man/woman, perhaps just here, by the gate. But no one is waiting here – or so he thinks, as he comes tripping down the lane. But then, as he reaches the gate, X steps out . . . from behind that laurel.' He paused briefly to glance about him before indicating the shrub. 'Are you with me?'

Gently regarded him, then slowly shook his head. 'I prefer the version you gave me this morning to a block alibi for the Shinglebourne Quartet.'

Capel came down off his elbows. 'But putting us aside – with none of your naughty little suspicions aroused – bringing a completely free mind to the problem – isn't that just how you'd see it?'

'Only my suspicions have been aroused . . .'

'Never mind! Try to suspend them for two minutes. Out from that laurel steps X to plant himself in front of Virtue. X is angry, X has motive, X is carrying – say – a stout cudgel, and probably without much palaver X commences an attack.' Capel dropped to a crouch. 'But note this! Virtue wasn't an easy customer. He was small but he was strong, and he'd learned to fight in a tough school. So he doesn't crumple – far from it! – he provides himself with a counter-weapon.' Capel lunged suddenly to the spot by the gate where the flint would have been. 'A stone-age man's weapon – lying here so conveniently – and with that in his hand he rushes at X.' He checked,

his eyes gleaming. ‘Doesn’t it begin to seem real?’

Gently’s face was a blank. ‘Go on.’

‘Now X is in dire peril. Virtue is coming at X viciously, he certainly means business. But X is no weakling either. X dodges Virtue’s attack. Then X catches Virtue on the skull with a cracking blow, and Virtue collapses.’ Capel’s eyes came at Gently powerfully. ‘And meanwhile Walt is strolling on the shingle, Laurel is describing the row to her people, Tom and I are downing a pint and Leonard is squatting on the john.’ He spread his hands. ‘QED. That’s about as close to it as anyone will get.’

Gently held his eye. ‘Except, possibly, X.’

‘Oh yes – X!’ Capel’s mouth puckered. ‘What about the tall dark stranger seen in the vicinity by young Dave?’

‘Of course . . . you’d know about that.’

‘Of course. I had the story from Crag. And Crag was loud in his complaints about policemen and their methods.’

‘And the flint . . . ?’

Capel’s eyes held still. ‘Pure deduction, l assure you. Given the sort of person Virtue was, it isn’t hard to imagine the rest.’

‘But who told you a flint was involved?’

‘Who?’ His eyebrows hooked high. ‘Walt – naturally! And here he comes, pat on cue, to be my surety.’

Hozeley had been standing in his porch for some moments and now he came across the gravel towards them. He gave Gently an unwelcoming stare before directing a glance of enquiry to Capel.

‘What was that, Henry?’

‘Your bit of flint,’ Capel said. ‘You’d told me the police had taken it away.’

‘Oh – that.’ Hozeley’s stooped shoulders lifted. ‘Well, I suppose it meant something to them. Dave has made me a wedge to replace it.’ He sent Gently another unfriendly look. ‘And you – you are still pursuing your inquiries?’

Gently replied with a faint nod.

‘He’s after Leonard,’ Capel grinned. ‘I’ve been trying to persuade him not to be an ass.’

‘Leonard?’ Hozeley looked incredulous. ‘How preposterous. I hope you succeeded.’

‘I’m not sure I have,’ Capel smiled. ‘Though I may have aroused a scintilla of doubt. What would you say, Superintendent?’

Gently said nothing. Capel’s eyes were amused again. Boyishly, he dug his hands deep in his pockets: he looked like a youngster who’d pulled off a jape.

In the office Gently found Leyston Blooming over the policewoman’s typed-up notes. He rose when he saw Gently and picked up a sheet from his tray.

‘Sir, we’ve got a line on a man who might be the one that spoke to young Crag.’

‘You’ve what!’

‘He’s only a possible, sir. But he spent Monday night at The Peal of Bells.’

Gently took the sheet. The man’s name was Spencer and he was a rep from Mill Hill. A regular visitor to Shinglebourne, he was said to be musically inclined. Gently grunted.

‘Have you talked to Mill Hill?’

‘Yes, sir. Spencer is away till tomorrow.’

‘So now forget him. What I want is another look at those snaps of the body.’

Together they pored over the photographs while Gently filled Leyston in. Beyond doubt, the position of the flint suggested that it had rolled from the upflung hand. In addition, the bruising on the buttock was explicable if the attacker’s weapon had been a cudgel . . . by deduction or other ways, Capel had supplied a definitive reconstruction.

At last Leyston sucked air through his teeth. ‘Another nail in Mr Meares’s coffin, sir.’

‘You think Meares was the source of Capel’s information?’

‘I can’t see anything else for it, sir. It bothered me at the time about the flint being clean, especially when there was a bit of blood. But his hair being coarse and bushy, the lab reckoned that it didn’t rule out the flint.’

‘I want a search party out there at first light.’

‘Yes, sir. We’ll comb the whole area.’

‘At a guess Meares picked up the weapon on the way – a heavy stick, perhaps a fence post.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Leyston looked dejected. ‘I’m sorry we missed it the first time, sir. But I was so certain we had the weapon.’

‘It may not be there. But search we must.’

Leyston touched his sideboard. ‘Do you reckon – just reckon, sir – that the doctor could have let out too much?’

‘Do *you* know his wife?’

‘Oh yes, sir. And I wouldn’t suspect funny business with her.’

‘Let’s stick to Meares, then. If the lab says “Yes” we’re in business, weapon or no.’

‘I was just wondering, sir,’ Leyston said. ‘The doctor being such a clever man.’

CHAPTER NINE

FRIDAY: AND ANOTHER dawn of sun.

It came sparkling round the edges of the bedroom curtains, waking Gently in a muck-sweat which the mutter of surf did little to alleviate. He rose with a curse for all east-facing bedrooms. The sea was the colour of tainted milk; a blue longshore boat, floating in nothing, suggested the smell of hot machinery and yesterday's fish. Massaging his chest, he unlimbered the phone and dialled the police station with a moist finger.

'Anything from the lab . . . ?'

There wasn't, and it scarcely seemed to matter. Below, a sweating delivery man was carrying trays of rolls from a van over which the air was already trembling. Nothing had cooled. The night had been a fallacy, a mere pretence of returning comfort. Now the pretence had faded again and once more they were turning it on . . .

Stolidly, he bathed, dressed and went down to breakfast in a dining room throbbing with sun. The big windows gaped open to the Front but admitted only heat and glare. The waiter who served him, otherwise unoccupied, went to lounge at a window while Gently ate. But he kept an eye on Gently's cup and returned alertly to refill it.

'Are you permanent staff here?' Gently asked him.

He had been at The White Hart for two seasons: a fresh-faced youngster with appealing eyes and a nose that had begun to peel.

'You'd know the Dr and Mrs Capel, then.'

'Yes sir, they're regulars here.'

'She attends his rehearsals, perhaps.'

'Now and then, sir. They have a meal in here before he goes in.'

'Would you call her a good mixer?'

'Well . . .' He looked nonplussed. 'She's very popular with the doctor's friends. And Mr Hozeley, the composer. They all seem to like Mrs Capel.'

'What about the fellow the fuss is about?'

'Yes, sir, she'd chat with him too.'

'You'd see them together sometimes?'

'Well . . . I don't know, sir!' The young waiter suddenly got hot. 'She did have a drink with him once in the bar, when she was waiting for the doctor.'

'Just the once.'

'Just the once, sir.'

Gently sighed and let him escape.

In reception he happened on the blonde who took occasional charge of the desk. She too knew Mrs Capel and described her as a looker who liked plenty of attention. Characteristically you would find her playing the Queen Bee to a group of men.

'Any gossip?' Gently hazarded daringly.

The blonde giggled. ‘It wouldn’t surprise me. When a woman goes on like that there’s usually something in the wind.’

‘Have you heard any names mentioned?’

‘Go on. It’s as much as my job is worth.’

‘One particular name . . . ?’

She longed to oblige but, regretfully, couldn’t slander Mrs Capel. Then the phone rang.

‘It’s for you.’

Leyston was at the other end. ‘Sir, the lab report . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘Positive, sir,’ Leyston said sombrely.

In effect there was blood on the right sandal and the group matched Virtue’s but not Meares’s: it had been detected in the seam of the sole at the toe, and the sandals bore evidence of having been rinsed. A single hair had also been recovered, from the right leg-cuff of the charcoal slacks. It was a close match for a sample taken from the scalp of the deceased.

‘So he’d spotted the blood, sir,’ Leyston mused, as they considered the report in his Sahara-like office. ‘Lucky he wasn’t up on lab techniques or he’d have shoved the sandals in an incinerator.’ He pondered. ‘Do you reckon he was putting the boot in?’

Gently wiped sweat. ‘It was his right foot.’

‘I’d say he must have done,’ Leyston said. ‘Just a parting kick before he cleared out. It makes you think, sir.’

Gently grunted. ‘Nothing yet from your search party?’

‘Not yet, sir.’

‘Better take a warrant and see what you can pick up at the house. All his sticks. And don’t forget the garage. Where is Meares now, by the way?’

‘Gone to his office.’

‘Pick him up then. Before this hell gets any hotter.’

Like the bedroom, Leyston’s den faced east and was blasted to its joists by the morning sun. Gently departed from it in haste to seek the relative cool of the M.T. yard. Somehow, this morning, the heat was getting to him, sapping his will to take things seriously. With his work cut out, with the cards in his hand, he was feeling indifferent to the whole business. Meares was ripe for destruction . . . so what? There must be better things to do! He lit his pipe and dumped himself down on someone’s toolbox, to wait.

‘Meares is here, sir.’

Leyston, on the other hand, was displaying a commendable stiffening of attitude.

‘He’s looking pretty sick, sir. I shouldn’t think he got a lot of sleep last night.’

‘Where have you put him?’

‘In the interrogation room. It’s cooler in there than in the office. But he’s looking really knocked-up, sir. He must know we’ve got the drop on him this time.’

Yes . . . a change of attitude! The lab report had done Meares for Leyston. ‘Mr Meares’ was chummie to him now, and Leyston prick-eared for a kill.

‘Have you sent to the house?’

‘Yes, sir. Sergeant Mason is taking care of that. And here’s another thing, sir. The man Spencer was in town all Monday afternoon. He was taking orders till after closing at Mansfield’s, the jewellers, so he couldn’t have been out at the cottage

asking questions about Virtue.'

Gently issued a smoke-ring. 'That keeps it tidy.'

'I think we can forget about the man out there, sir. If there really was one I daresay young Crag got hold of the wrong end of the stick.' He lounged against the wall and lit a cigarette. 'How long do you reckon we should let him stew, sir?'

'Give him ten minutes to settle in.'

Leyston drew an anticipatory lungful.

The interrogation room was about twelve feet by ten and had one window, high up in the wall. It was furnished with a lino-topped trestle table, four varnished chairs and a reek of polish. Meares sat at the table. He did indeed look sick. There were bruise-like patches about his eyes. Yet he was dressed neatly, if inappropriately, in a sleeved shirt and bow tie. He raised his head as they came in, followed by the policewoman with her gear. The room, which faced to the rear of the building, had not yet generated a head of heat. Gently took the chair opposite Meares. Leyston sat to his left, the policewoman to his right. Leyston signed to the constable who had been attending: he left, closing the door.

'Now . . . Mr Meares.'

Meares was sitting with his arms leant on the table. His eyes met Gently's for an instant, slightly staring, glazed.

'Yesterday you weren't being altogether helpful. There were questions we felt you could have answered. It may save time if you are prepared to write a new and more informative statement.'

'I have given you my statement.' His voice was husky.

'Yes, but that was forty-eight hours ago. Now, in view of our recent investigations, you may care for an opportunity to revise it.'

'I – don't wish to do that.'

'Here are pencils and paper.'

'No! I've said all I'm going to say.'

'It would probably shorten this interview.'

'I have nothing to add to what I told you.'

Gently nodded, quite agreeably. Meares was staring at his sweaty hands. Sweat was standing on his forehead and gleaming on his sallow cheeks.

'Before we continue, then, a formality. I am required to administer a caution. You are not obliged to answer questions, but what you say will be taken down in writing and may be given in evidence.'

'I . . . understand.' Meares's mouth was trembling.

'Good.' Gently folded his hands. 'Now perhaps we can clarify some points that were left in doubt yesterday. What exactly were your relations with Virtue?'

'You – you said I needn't answer questions.'

'This is clarification, you understand. Naturally we've formed a certain opinion.'

'I was . . . friendly towards him. No more.'

'Friendly in a rather tendentious way?'

'I deny that!'

'But you admitted it yesterday. And that was the impression of independent witnesses.'

'I didn't – admit it!' He fought for words. 'I – I was treating him according to his nature. That – that's a professional requirement, something I'm doing every day.'

‘Then you weren’t courting him – as some people thought?’

‘No, I absolutely deny it!’

‘So that if he was seen offering to go with you into the marrams, it wasn’t necessarily for an improper purpose.’

‘I didn’t go with him—’

‘You’re denying that too?’

‘Yes.’ Meares’s head weaved. ‘Yes, I’m denying it.’

‘That’s rather awkward,’ Gently said. ‘Because we have testimony from a witness of unusual integrity. Of course, you may be right and he may be wrong, but the test in these cases is credibility. We may believe you, but would other people – for example, would a jury?’

Meares swayed. ‘I – still deny it!’

‘Could this simply be a question of faulty memory?’

His hands dragged together shakily and he sat with tight lips.

‘Well – we’ll leave it!’ Gently said cheerfully. ‘What isn’t in dispute is that you were friends with him. You were ready to play up to his temperament, to give him your company and make much of him. Yet – suddenly – on Tuesday all this changed. That’s a point we’d better clear up. Why were you hostile to him on Tuesday, when you’d been so friendly with him before?’

‘I wasn’t hostile—’

‘It’s in the statements. You were the first to take exception.’

‘I merely said – what the occasion justified!’

Smilingly, Gently shook his head. I’m sure you understand what is implied here.’

‘I don’t wish to answer any more questions.’

‘What we can allege is that Virtue was blackmailing you over the incident in the marrams on Saturday.’

‘There was no incident – no blackmail!’

‘Then we need to account for your change of face.’

‘I . . . there was no change of face!’

‘You can’t help us.’

Meares raised his clasped hands and let them fall.

‘So we’ll leave that too,’ Gently said. ‘Along with Virtue’s threats on that occasion. We can perhaps come back to it later when the situation is clearer in your mind.’ He picked up one of the pencils lying on the table and stroked a firm line on a sheet of paper. ‘Here’s a question you can answer – yes or no! Are you certain what clothes you were wearing on Tuesday?’

Meares’s sweating face wavered and his hand shot to his mouth: he half-rose.

‘Right!’ Gently snapped. ‘Get him along to the john.’

Leyston hustled him out, knocking over a chair in his eagerness; a door slammed down the passage and, after an interval, one heard the flushing of a cistern. Gently shrugged and added strokes to his paper: Meares would break, that was pretty certain. Doubtless someone else had been at work on him in the still hours of the night . . .

‘Does that . . . often happen, sir?’

The policewoman, a young one, was staring at him gravely.

Gently grimaced. ‘Better be prepared for it! They don’t all manage to leave the room.’

When Meares returned he looked shakier than ever, though now his face had been

wiped free of sweat. As he took his seat again he shuddered and his eyes briefly met Gently's.

'I'm sorry . . .'

'Think nothing of it.'

He linked his shaking fingers together. 'With regard to your question . . . I was wearing the cream lightweight suit and the Italian shoes.'

Gently eyed the policewoman, who began hastily to scribble.

'You're sure you can trust your memory about that?'

Meares nodded.

'It wouldn't have been the grey jacket, charcoal slacks and sandals?'

'No . . .'

'Not the sandals?'

'I . . . haven't worn them lately.'

'Not . . . lately.'

He was pale to the lips, but kept the lips pressed together.

'Well then . . . in your lightweight suit.' Gently pencilled a sweeping circle. 'You left the Music Room, declined a lift, and were seen proceeding up Saxton Road. That's how it goes, isn't it?'

'I . . . I explained about that yesterday.'

'Oh yes. Your Mr Maxwell and the sudden call of nature.'

'Mr Maxwell will confirm—'

'Yes, of course. But you didn't actually go to his house, did you?'

Meares's chin tilted feebly. 'I went to the toilet and nowhere else.'

'Yes . . . but that still leaves us with a problem.' Gently took his time in bisecting the circle. 'You see . . . your memory is less than precise about what took place on what day. You were able to confuse Saturday with Sunday – and you were quite positive at the time – until, luckily, we were able to put you right. Couldn't the same thing have happened here?'

'That's not possible!'

Gently hunched. 'In our experience, it happens frequently. In fact, one would say more often than not, when people are trying to account for their movements. They remember occasions in great detail that have nothing to do with the matter in hand. In the present instance, what could be more likely than your continuing up Saxton Road?'

'But I *do* remember!'

Gently shook his head. 'Look, the road was practically deserted just then. Yet we have testimony that someone was hurrying along it at exactly that time. Who else could it have been?'

'I went back to the toilet!'

'That was some other night.'

'No – it was then. After the rehearsal!'

'Why did you leave your cello at the hotel, and decline your regular lift home?'

Meares's head was waving again and sweat had reappeared on his brow. His eyes had an off-focus look, were directed somewhere below Gently's chin.

'Naturally, this has been a strain for you,' Gently said. 'That would help to account for slips of memory. It could well have been that you suffered a blackout after you left the hotel that evening. We can understand that. We know about blackouts – in our line we're meeting them all the time! But usually with patience and a little help

from the evidence we can bring about complete recall.' He stroked off a square. 'Isn't your memory becoming clearer?'

Meares shivered but didn't reply. One would have said he was a long way away, listening to sounds from a different world.

'Anyway . . . let's suppose for the moment that you remember hurrying up that road. You left the hotel shortly after Virtue. Couldn't you have caught up with him in the lane?'

'I couldn't . . . no!'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because . . . he left a good five minutes ahead of me.'

'But if he'd gone by the links instead of by the road?'

Meares stared glassily, his mouth hanging open.

Gently ripped off a line. 'If he'd gone by the links, that might account for the time factor. You could have left the hotel five minutes later and still have been at the cottage before him.'

'But he went by the road!'

'How do you know?'

'Because . . . because . . .' He was weaving dangerously. 'Why should he have gone round there just then . . . what was the point? He would have gone by the road!'

'I think you can be more definite than that.'

'He went by the road . . . I couldn't have caught him.'

'Then where was he when you got there?'

'He wasn't . . . I . . . !' Meares's mouth trembled shut.

'I think he went by the links,' Gently said. 'The statements have him leaving the Music Room by the porch. That would be his exit if he was heading for the footpath, and you could see through the window which way he turned.'

Meares groaned and dragged on his hands.

'So you could have been there before him,' Gently said. 'In time to take your stand, say, behind that laurel bush that grows beside the gate.'

'This is . . . fantasy!'

'Bear with me.' Gently scribbled a few short strokes. 'After all, we must do our best to assist your uncertain memory. Now . . . from somewhere . . . you'd collected a weapon.'

'No!'

'We've got men out searching for it – a heavy stick, something of that sort. Virtue's skull wasn't very thick.'

'I won't listen!'

'We'll find it,' Gently said. 'I expect you got rid of it pretty quickly. About then you'd be panicking, naturally, with Virtue lying bleeding on the ground. Or didn't the blood show up in that light? Possibly you didn't see the blood. That would explain why, going to kick him, you risked aiming a kick at his head. Would that be right?'

His face was a blur, nodding slowly, this side to that.

'Not that there was much blood on your sandal,' Gently said. 'You'd washed most of it off . . . we found only a trace.'

His hand came up. This time, Leyston fielded him without overturning a chair. The policewoman knocked over hers, however, in her rush to follow them out.

'Could I . . . perhaps . . . have a drink of tea?'

The room had got no cooler in his absence. Though the high window was swung to horizontal it appeared to play no role in the matter. Gently had spent the interval in the passage, leaving the interrogation room door ajar. But all that had done was to charge the room with superheated air from the front of the building. Then the policewoman had returned in a miasma of eau de cologne. It smelled at once stale and acrid: directly, Gently had felt for his pipe.

'Why not?'

He nodded to the policewoman, who rose again with an effort to do his bidding.

Meares had dispensed with his tie now, and sat with his shirt front and cuffs unbuttoned. Oddly, his chest showed a mat of black hair, plastered in spandrels by perspiration. Pallor gave his sallow cheeks a greenish tinge and accentuated the bruised eyes. He leaned forward, resting on his arms, the eyes withdrawn, empty.

The tea came. Meares sipped it with the same faraway expression: as though he'd momentarily switched off and retired to some inner sanctuary. At last cup chattered back to saucer.

'I – I'm ready now.'

'Ready . . . ?'

'To answer your questions.' His dark eyes found Gently's. 'It's no use hanging on, is it?'

Gently sucked air through the pipe he hadn't lit. Really this was going a bit too well! No delaying tactics or appeals for lawyers: it was almost as though Meares was asking to be broken. He pushed across some paper.

'Perhaps now . . . a statement?'

'No . . . I'd sooner answer your questions.'

Gently hunched massively. 'For starters, then! Tell me all about the connection with Virtue.'

Meares straightened himself a little. 'It . . . was much as you thought.' His eyes were quiveringly frank. 'I – I was attracted by him. I ought not to have been, but somehow . . . in the end . . . it seemed quite natural.'

'How do you mean?'

Meares glanced at the policewoman, who was staring fixedly at her pad. 'I mean . . . Virtue was that sort of person, not properly a man. It seemed normal with him.'

'No doubt he encouraged you.'

'I suppose so. He truly was . . . well, like a girl. His responses were feminine. He was a flirt. It was like being with a girl but with an extra stimulus.'

'And you fell for him.'

'No . . . not at once! Honestly, I'm not that sort of person. I was shocked when I realized how I was feeling about him . . . tried to rationalize it, keep it superficial. But . . . it was insidious. As I said, with Virtue it seemed almost normal. Then there was Walt's example in front of me . . . you can't censure Walt, whatever he does.'

'And of course, the Greeks and Michelangelo.'

Meares shook his head. 'I'm not trying to excuse myself. But yes, there is a long mystique attached to it, and that does seem to provide an aura of permissiveness. When the club is so ancient and exclusive you feel fewer scruples at becoming a member.'

'Murder is a club just as ancient and exclusive.'

'I repeat that I'm offering no excuses!' Meares's eyes had winced. 'I only want to explain how a person like myself can act as I did. And I tried to resist it. Virtue was

willing. It might have happened much sooner than it did. But I resisted it until that wretched encounter on the dunes on Saturday.'

'Virtue knew you were hooked.'

He dropped his eyes. 'I'm afraid there's no question about that. I know now that he had everything planned, ready for me to fall into his trap.'

'On Saturday.'

Meares nodded. 'He knew just where to find me. I make a habit of patrolling the dunes on Saturday – a sort of unofficial warden, if you like. And Virtue knew it. He had only to wait there. On the dunes there is certain to be opportunity. As it happened we were the only people in sight . . . or so I permitted myself to think.'

'Virtue wouldn't have cared.'

'No.'

Meares was still staring down. What his eyes were gazing at had drawn his black brows into sweaty furrows. 'What was he after?'

'He wanted Up-and-Under.'

'Wanted what!'

Meares gestured. 'It's a tiny house that stands on the Front, facing the sea. Probably once a beachman's lookout, one up and one down. It's been restored and modernized. Everyone who sets eyes on it wants it.'

'And you own it?'

He shook his head. 'We act as agents for the owner. The lease falls due at the end of the month. Virtue knew that. He wanted it.'

'Free of rent and rates, naturally.'

Meares's hand rose and fell.

'Plus pocket money.'

'He mentioned a sum.'

'You'd have been lucky to have got away with that! What was he threatening?'

'To inform my wife and head office. And everyone else.'

'Including Walt.'

'Walt . . . first.'

Gently sucked his pipe and gazed at him.

'I . . . I didn't accept his terms,' Meares ventured. 'I let him see I thought he was bluffing.'

'You'd have accepted them.'

'But you see . . . I couldn't.' He shifted position awkwardly. 'I've just bought a new yacht, which has rather . . . extended my resources. I couldn't afford what Virtue wanted. I made him understand that.'

'And he settled for a rain check?'

'No. Actually . . .'

'He didn't,' Gently said. 'And he wouldn't. More likely he'd tell you to cash the yacht or fiddle the company's loan account. Virtue was a professional when it came to extortion. You were stuck with him and you knew it. So let's get on to Tuesday night and the way this little problem was solved.'

Meares's eyes were distant again, his mouth bitter. He took a fresh grip with his hands.

'I was . . . incensed . . . by what happened at the rehearsal. I was seeing Virtue in a new light.'

'No doubt of that!'

‘Perhaps, until then, I’d been making excuses for him to myself. But his behaviour there was wanton and evil, and I knew he had to be resisted.’

‘In fact, you proposed to yourself a final solution.’

Meares ignored him. ‘I resolved to confront him. I resolved to defy him on my own behalf and to punish him for his wickedness to Walt. There might be consequences, but I would accept them. They would be less than those of suffering Virtue. When the rehearsal broke up early and Walt didn’t go home I saw my opportunity. Yes . . . I followed him.’

‘Followed him – intending to beat him up.’

‘I intended to thrash him till he couldn’t stand.’

Gently gazed, a little wonderingly. ‘Well . . . it’s nice to have that on the table!’

Meares dropped his head. ‘I wish to hide nothing. You have taught me the futility of lies. I had but one thought when I went after Virtue and that was to make him pay. I followed him as fast as I could – you were right, I did see which way he turned. He went the direct way, by Saxton Road. And the man seen hastening up there was me.’

‘And you caught him.’

‘In a manner . . . yes. Though I saw no sign of him in Saxton Road. It was in the lane where I came across him . . . I tripped over his body, by Walt’s gate.’

‘You – tripped over it!’

‘Yes. It was lying there. That’s when I got the blood on my sandal. He was quite dead, not breathing. I struck a match. He was gone.’

Gently leaned back, his eyes two points. ‘You’re saying it *wasn’t* you who killed Virtue?’

‘Certainly not.’ Meares’s gaze was on the table. ‘It was all over before I got there.’

‘You simply – found the body.’

‘Just as I told you.’

‘And heard – and saw – nothing to account for it?’

‘No.’

‘Though you were there within moments of the killing?’

‘Nothing,’ Meares said stubbornly. ‘Nothing.’

In Leyston’s office they held a conference.

‘He’s got to be lying, sir,’ Leyston said. ‘When he found we’d copped him with the goods he had to change his tale – and this is it.’

‘But what’s he lying about?’

‘Him killing Virtue.’

Gently took a sight along his pipe. ‘I think I might have believed him about that – if he hadn’t gone suddenly blind and deaf.’

Leyston considered the point with a frown. ‘You reckon he’s covering for someone, sir?’

‘It’s possible.’

‘But who, sir?’

‘We still have Hozeley in the wings.’

‘Hozeley!’

Gently nodded. ‘He could have beaten Virtue to the cottage in his car. Meares would risk his neck for Hozeley . . . and Hozeley’s alibi is zero.’

Leyston took a long pull on a sideboard. ‘No, sir,’ he said. ‘Not Mr Hozeley. I did fancy him for it once, but I’ve changed my ideas a bit since then.’

‘Also . . . there’s the time factor.’

‘Sir?’

‘We only have Meares’s word for when Virtue died. His wife’s corroboration may be worthless. And a later time of death would widen the field.’

Leyston brooded, but shook his head. ‘I’m pinning my faith on chummie, sir. We’ve got him properly cornered now, and I reckon another session will do his business.’

Gently sighed. ‘I daresay you’re right! So I’ll leave you to carry on the good work.’

‘Me, sir?’ Leyston said.

Gently reached for his hat. ‘I want to see a man.’

CHAPTER TEN

SUN FLASHED FROM the river like splinters of steel and bubbled tar from the seams of the old hulks. A heavy smell, between sweet and pungent, hung about the yacht sitting on the cradle. Beneath her stood a tin labelled Protim and two brushes, dunked in a jar. Through her gaping side one could see the hog soaked with a dark, dull stain.

Nothing was stirring on the river. The moored boats were spreadeagled by slack water. Behind them the marshes were on a tremble and to their left the shingle dunes vanished into haze.

'So you've come back again, have you . . . ?'

Friday stood in the gape of the big shed. He was wearing the same boiler-suit bottom to supplement the tan of his well-muscled torso. His wide-jawed face was scowling and smeared with the dark stain. It was on his fingers, too: he kept working them, trying to get rid of it.

'You won't be told, will you?'

Gently hunched faintly. 'What won't we be told?'

Friday didn't reply. He stood gently rocking and scowling at the river and the boats. He motioned with his hand.

'You took my tip then – you're putting Foxy through the hoop.'

'Mr Meares is assisting us.'

'Yes – I'll bet! Where've I heard that song before?' He spat on the slipway. 'It won't do you any good, though. Foxy didn't get his name for nothing.'

'That wasn't what you were hinting yesterday.'

'Never mind about that! It's what I'm telling you today.'

Gently looked around; he hitched up an oil drum from a batch that stood by the slipway. He dusted it off and sat. Friday watched him with wary eyes.

'Let me guess why you've changed your tune! You've been having a talk with the doctor.'

'You go to hell,' Friday said. 'I'm not playing your game, mate.'

'Didn't he tell you to lay off Meares?'

'Go to hell – it's none of your business!'

'I think that would be the message,' Gently said. 'Meares has got in too deep, and now he needs a lifeline.'

'I'm not playing, mate.'

'Because Meares didn't do it.'

Friday glared down at him, his hands working. His eyes seemed closer together than ever, hooked in by the deepening scowl.

'Oh, Meares was there,' Gently said. 'We've just had proof of that from the lab. Meares was there and saw what happened – but Meares didn't strike the blow, did he?'

Friday's hands were fists. 'Nor it wasn't me, neither!'

'Because you were drinking with the doctor at the time?'

'Too bloody true. And there's a dozen witnesses, so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it.'

'But we don't know what the time was – do we?'

'Don't know—?' Friday's eyes widened.

'The post-mortem report leaves it open. We're left with the time attributed by Meares.'

Friday's hands slowly uncurled. 'But . . . why would Foxy lie about a thing like that?'

'I can think of one very good reason.'

Friday's scowl had sagged: he was looking stunned.

'Let's just put it together,' Gently mused. 'You and the doctor were drinking in the bar. At ten minutes to ten you left . . . and who can vouch for your movements after that?'

'My daughter can vouch for me!'

Gently shook his head. 'I'm sure your daughter is a good girl. But I have the doctor's own word for it that she would lie for either him or you.'

'But she didn't have to lie.'

'Only in your case. She couldn't give the doctor an alibi, anyway.'

'Look, I don't know about the doctor—!'

'And neither do we know about you.'

Friday breathed faster. He grabbed another oil drum, pulled it across and dropped himself on it. He sat slanted away from Gently, his mahogany shoulders freckling with sweat.

'So – what do you want to know?'

'You can tell me who killed Virtue.'

'It wasn't me!'

'But you know who. And you know it wasn't Meares.'

He squeezed his knees. 'And you'll keep slugging at me till I let something slip.'

'Till I know too,' Gently said.

Friday groaned. 'This is how I said it would be!'

At the top of the shed someone switched on a saw: Friday jerked his head round to bellow. When the saw stopped all one heard was the chirping of sparrows in the roof. Behind them, its frames jutting, loomed the hull of a part-finished cruiser: one could smell the raw timber and the fume of thinned varnish. Friday struck his knee.

'Look . . . for heaven's sake! Virtue wasn't worth all this trouble. So he bought it, and you've made the motions. Why not let it stop at that?'

'And let Meares take the consequences?'

'To hell with Meares.'

'We've got enough to put him away.'

Friday's eyes were mean. '*You* know he didn't do it.'

'But I'm not the jury. They'll think he did.'

'Not if you drop it.'

Gently's head shook. 'We can't switch it on and off like that saw! There's a case to answer. Unless we hear otherwise, Meares is going into the dock.'

'And that's all you care.'

Gently grunted. 'Perhaps Meares did do it, after all!'

Friday sat punishing his knees again, with the sweat draining faster down his back. Someone was working with a plane behind the cruiser, hissing strokes that began with a thud.

'Suppose it was me, then.'

'I'm listening.'

'I'm the sort who doesn't know his own strength. I could have done it and not known it, with a puff of wind like Virtue.'

'Using what weapon?'

'No weapon! He'd hit his head on that flint, wouldn't he? If he'd come at me with that I'd have smacked him down hard, and then it could have happened.'

Gently hunched. 'The jaw wasn't bruised.'

'Who said I thumped him on the jaw?'

'Who told you about the flint?'

'What—?' Friday jerked round.

'And who told you there was injury to the head?'

The plane thudded and hissed; it was probably a large one, being swept two-handed through its strokes. It paused, added one for good measure, then was set aside with a thump. Friday sprang up.

'I've had enough!'

'I still want an answer to my question.'

'You may want, mate!' Turning, he ran across the slipway to the piled staithe.

Gently followed him. A scarred work-dinghy lay blistering in the sun by the staithe: it dipped but didn't rock as Friday stepped into it and unhitched the painter. Oars slammed into rowlocks. Gently didn't interfere. Friday took long strokes into midstream; the ebb had begun to run and was helping him downstream – towards the sea, if he wanted to go there.

The blue Rover 2000 stood under the beeches but Lapel's Volvo Estate was missing. The big red-brick house had a deserted air, though the front door was stopped wide open. From it a wide hall, tiled black and white, stretched through to a leaded window with coloured glass panes. On the right was the staircase, wide and shallow-stepped. It rose to a landing with baroque iron rails.

Gently rang. Nobody answered. In the silence one could hear a clock ticking down the hall. A tortoiseshell cat, large and old, peered at him from the landing and vanished again. Gently rang and kept his finger on the button. This time there was a sound of movement overhead. A window squeaked: Gently stepped back. A blonde woman with a slightly-tousled head was looking down at him.

'I'm sorry – Dr Henry's out!'

'Mrs Capel . . . ?'

'Just a minute!'

Her head disappeared. After a short interval, she came smilingly down the stairs.

'Sorry . . . but I wasn't quite respectable! You'll be the man from the Yard, will you?'

She inspected him with interested, hyacinth-blue eyes completely free from any trace of embarrassment. She was younger than Capel and had bold, golden-skinned features and shoulder-length hair the colour of ripe wheat. She was wearing a belted towelling wrap that hid nothing of her Junoesque figure. Her feet were bare. She had large hands with tapering fingers naked of rings.

‘I’m Tanya. I’m afraid you’ve missed Henry. He’s away at a BMA meeting at Eastwich. You could probably contact him at the Eastwich and County, but otherwise he won’t be in till this evening.’

‘This came up . . . suddenly?’

‘Yes, it did. Normally, it wouldn’t be his turn yet. I expect someone dropped out – holidays, or something. You can’t call your soul your own in this business.’

‘Perhaps I could talk to Miss Friday, then.’

‘Sorry again – she went with him.’

‘Is that usual?’

‘Oh yes. Marion takes care of his paperwork.’

Her eyes switched past him for a moment to a car passing down Saxton Road; then they returned to his probingly. She flipped the belt of her wrap.

‘Poor old Leonard. Is it true that he’s really in a jam?’

‘I’m afraid he is.’

‘But he’s such a lamb. Nobody in Shinglebourne will believe it of him.’

‘Who would they believe it of, Mrs Capel?’

She gave a throbbing little laugh. ‘Don’t ask me to put ideas in your head. You can probably get enough of those from Henry.’

‘I believe you knew the deceased.’

‘Yes.’ The twinkle went from her eye. ‘Here we tend to look at things clinically, of course. Terry was an – interesting case.’

‘Bisexual, I think Dr Capel said.’

She made a mouth. ‘Quite certainly that. He never actually made a pass at me, but I could sense the X-ray in his eyes. Then there was the business with Marion.’

‘With Miss Friday?’

‘I think she may have slapped his face. Her own was pretty red, anyway. But I didn’t see what actually happened.’ She laughed again. ‘Does all this mean something?’

Gently stared back woodenly. ‘Do you think it does?’

‘I’m not certain,’ she said. ‘Not being a policeman. But I don’t see how it affects old Leonard.’

‘Who was present when Miss Friday slapped his face?’

‘Well, it happened out in the garden. The rest of us were in the lounge. It was during a break in a rehearsal.’

‘Her father was present.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Tanya Capel rolled her eyes. ‘Oh dear! And you are looking for a man with a motive, aren’t you?’

Gently stared but said nothing.

Tanya Capel fingered her belt. ‘Well – those are all my confessions,’ she said. ‘Not very illuminating. I doubt if Tom even noticed his daughter’s red face. Marion blushes at nothing, you know.’ She gave the belt a firm tug. ‘Henry should be in by seven, if you’d care to call back then.’

‘I’ll call back,’ Gently said. ‘Thank you for talking to me, Mrs Capel.’

She gazed at him uncertainly, the hyacinth eyes questioning. Then she threw him a smile that was half a grimace and went back up the stairs.

The doors of the garage at Gorse Cottage stood open but the Rolls’ louvred muzzle showed within, and from a window sounded stabbing piano notes, intermittent,

almost angry. Walt Hozeley was at home. Through the window one glimpsed him sitting hunched over the keyboard, now hammering upon it, now pencilling impatiently on sheets spread before him. A cigarette trailed smoke from a corner of his mouth and a pince-nez rode his butte-like nose. He didn't hear the Marina crunch over his gravel or, if he did, paid it no attention.

The housekeeper answered Gently's ring. He pushed in past her protestations. He went through the oak door into the lounge and closed the door behind him. Hozeley looked up over his pince-nez. Gently advanced to the piano. The French doors stood ajar: at the bottom of the garden, David Crag was picking beans into a trug. Slowly Hozeley removed the pince-nez and took the cigarette from his mouth.

'You are intruding, Superintendent.'

'Sometimes I need to in my profession.'

'But you have no occasion to intrude here.'

'Not if what's happening to Meares doesn't worry you.'

Hozeley's face offered little expression: Gently had yet to catch it when it did. Brooding beneath the plumed brows, it resembled a piece of sculpture come partly alive. The eyes, large and remote, seemed to inhabit distant worlds.

'You are still harrying Leonard?'

'Why not? We found Virtue's blood on one of his sandals.'

Even that didn't register a hit beyond a slight compression of the lips.

'I don't wish to discuss that person.'

'You seem to have dismissed him pretty thoroughly.'

'I have dismissed him entirely. He is no longer a factor. What happened there happened between two other people.'

'And no tears shed.'

Hozeley puffed the cigarette and retired his eyes to wherever they'd come from.

'But that doesn't help Meares,' Gently said. 'Unfortunately Meares can't just turn his back. He can only lie his way to a jury who won't believe him either. In other words you've lost your Cello – unless Capel has a cellist up his sleeve, too.'

'You will not arrest Leonard.'

'We've already done so.'

'Then I suggest that you release him.' Hozeley drifted smoke through his great nose. 'We have a rehearsal this evening and two tomorrow.'

'I don't think you understand.'

'Leonard isn't responsible. By some mischance he discovered the body, and that is his sole connection with the affair. So I suggest that you release him at once to allow him time to collect himself for this evening.'

'Not without a signed confession from someone.'

'Don't be absurd.' Hozeley stubbed his cigarette.

Gently drew a long breath. Out in the garden David Crag had turned his attention to the raspberries: he was collecting them in a chip basket, and pausing now and then to sample one. Perhaps at last showing deference to the sun, he was dressed today in an ex-Service bush-shirt. The sleeves were worn down: he had to shoot a cuff to examine his watch. It flashed yellow in the sun.

'What else do you have Dr Henry's word for?'

Hozeley had re-affixed the pince-nez. Almost as though Gently had been switched off, the composer was back with his crotchets and quavers.

'I am sure the doctor has been most helpful.'

‘Oh yes – he practically drew a diagram!’

‘He is a man of great intelligence. You will do well to accept what he tells you.’

‘What he told me was that Virtue fancied his wife.’

‘Tanya?’ Hozeley condescended a glance. ‘Not very probable. But if the doctor says so there must certainly be something in it.’

‘But that wouldn’t have bothered you?’

‘What? Why should it?’

‘You didn’t care about Virtue going after women.’

Hozeley’s eyes were severe. ‘I have told you already that I don’t wish to discuss that person. The episode is over. I am not now concerned. Tidying-up the affair is your business. I require Leonard, of course, and I expect his release; and that, I insist, is the end of the discussion.’

‘You refuse to help me any further.’

‘I have nothing to add.’

‘How much a week do you pay young David?’

‘I – what?’ Hozeley’s stare was sharp.

‘Never mind,’ Gently said. ‘I’ll ask him myself.’

The rows of raspberry canes were trained to wires in a corner sheltered by an old brick wall. The spot was a suntrap and the fawn canes were drooping under the weight of much fruit. David Crag was sweating through his bush-shirt as he stooped among the rows. He straightened up gaping and hot-faced. The still air was laced with the odour of the raspberries.

‘Good weather for these?’ Gently asked amiably.

David Crag said nothing. His coltish features were smothered in sweat and his fair hair daubed to his forehead. He had a clumsy, strong-boned frame and hands calloused by labour. Along with the bush-shirt he wore faded jeans supported by a fancy belt of stamped leather.

‘Now . . . about that man you met on Monday.’

In his helpless stare there was something clownish. His mouth had continued to gape: involuntarily, he licked his lips.

‘I got to get this stuff in for Mrs Butley . . .’

‘She won’t mind waiting a few minutes.’

‘No, you don’t know her. She’ll mob me.’

‘Let’s go outside. Through the door in the wall.’

Firmly he took possession of the chip basket and set it down in the shade of the canes. He nodded to the door; David Crag moved unwillingly to open it. The door gave directly on to the heath, which here was clothed with gorse thickets. A short path led through the gorse to a wider path departing in the direction of the town.

‘This is your way to and from work?’

He licked his lips again. ‘That’s right.’

From the junction the path was visible for some hundreds of yards, running straight through the alleys of gorse.

‘Show me where you met him.’

‘Well, it was here, like . . .’

‘Point me out the exact spot.’

David Crag stared about stupidly, then pointed to the path.

‘Describe this man.’

He wiped away sweat. ‘Well, he was tall, like . . . about like you. And he spoke different, didn’t he? Like he came from London, I reckon.’

‘What was he wearing?’

‘He’d got a sort of blue shirt on, and some dark-like trousers.’

‘A jacket?’

‘Oh ah! But he was carrying that, like.’

‘What about shoes?’

‘Yes, his shoes. They was brown with big heels.’

‘Hat?’

His tongue worked again. ‘Got a funny sort of straw hat, hadn’t he?’

Gently took a step nearer to one of the gorses and sniffed at the hot, sweet fragrance. He fingered the yellow pods. David Crag hadn’t closed his mouth.

‘Tell me what happened.’

David Crag gulped. ‘He – he spoke to me, didn’t he? Asked me if Mr Hozeley didn’t live here, and if a young fellow called Virtue wasn’t staying with him.’

‘Did he say why he asked that?’

‘Well no, he didn’t.’

‘He gave no hint that he knew them?’

Behind Gently David Crag hesitated. Then he shuffled a foot: ‘No.’

‘And you left him standing here.’

‘Well . . . yes! I can’t say where he went then.’

‘Going down this path, wouldn’t you have looked back?’

‘No. No, I didn’t look back.’

‘You weren’t at all curious about him?’

One could hear the tongue rasp on his dry lips. ‘No, I wasn’t, was I? I didn’t know nothing about all this, then.’

Gently nodded to the gorse. ‘Right . . . I think that’s all here. But I’d like you to accompany me to the house. There is something I want you to do.’

‘But I got to pick those raspberries for Mrs Butley—!’

‘What you have to do won’t take a moment.’

He gave David Crag a gentle push in the direction of the garden. They marched back through the gate and up the path to the cottage. Hozeley was watching from the French doors. He backed off to the piano as they entered. David Crag didn’t look at Hozeley. He came to a stand short of the piano.

‘Now, David,’ Gently said. ‘I want you to tell Mr Hozeley the time.’

‘The time—?’ David Crag gaped.

‘Yes . . . by the watch you’re wearing on your wrist.’

David Crag’s eyes rolled. He lurched a little and made a half-hearted move towards the doors. Gently caught his arm. He forced him to the piano and flicked back the sweat-soaked cuff of the bush-shirt. He looked at Hozeley.

‘Well . . . ?’

The watch was a gold-cased Rolex Oyster; it was on a gold bracelet and had a matt black dial chased with swirling silver lines.

‘What’s your verdict?’

Hozeley’s eyes were molten. They flashed from the watch to the trembling David Crag. He said not a word but, turning from the piano, strode down the room and stood with his back to them.

Gently hooked off the watch and slipped it in his pocket.

‘Come along, David,’ he said. ‘Suddenly, I feel you’re on your own.’
David Crag made a choking sound; he could scarcely walk.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IT WAS HIGH noon in the interrogation room but nobody seemed rushing to pull a gun. In fact a sort of sulky silence prevailed, like that of a class kept in past playtime. Meares, his shirt now open to the last button, sat head in hands, considering the table. Leyston, his head tilted back, was giving an impression of the ennui to be seen in Victorian photo portraits. The policewoman had arranged her pencils in a pattern and was soulfully gazing at the high window: it had the air of being a room where everything had been said that anyone could at all think of.

When Gently entered they stirred slightly and Leyston rose in languid acknowledgement. Gently approached the table. He laid the gold Rolex on the spot that Meares was so earnestly observing. Meares started. He gazed at the watch, glanced at Gently, then back at the watch.

'That's Virtue's.'

'Are you sure of that?'

'Of course. There can't be two like it in Shinglebourne.'

'You have seen him wearing it?'

Meares shrugged faintly. 'Everyone has. It was a present from Walt. I happen to know it cost Walt a shade over eight hundred and fifty pounds. Virtue couldn't show it off enough. Ask the others – they'll tell you.'

Gently picked up the watch. 'When did you last see it?'

Meares's eyes followed it. 'I . . . don't remember.'

'Would it have been at Tuesday's rehearsal?'

'If you say it was I won't contradict you.'

'But was it?'

Meares gestured wearily. 'It probably was, but I don't remember. He never wore it when he was playing anyway – musicians have a thing about that.'

'So that was the last time you saw it.'

'All right . . . say it was!'

'But when you struck that match . . . didn't you see it then, glinting on Virtue's upflung wrist?'

Meares's eyes went still. They stayed on the watch, which Gently dangled before him hypnotically. One could hear its tiny ticking in the hot silence of the room. He looked up.

'No . . . I didn't see it.'

'Wouldn't he have put it back on when he finished playing?'

'Yes, he would – and I *should* have seen it!' Meares's eyes sparkled suddenly. 'Where did you find it?'

Gently dropped the watch back in his pocket. He nodded to Leyston and headed for the door. Meares had half-risen from his chair: he was gazing after them in dismay.

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'But where *did you* find it, sir?' Leyston echoed as they went through to his office. 'It wasn't in his room at the cottage. We only found a cheap Timex there.'

Gently dropped into the chair at the desk, felt for his pipe and deliberately lit it. Through the initial wreaths of smoke he said:

'Would you believe David Crag's wrist?'

'David Crag . . . !'

Gently nodded. 'The temptation to wear it must have been too great. He had on a sleeved shirt to conceal it from Hozeley. Hozeley recognized it but isn't talking.'

'Glory be!' Leyston sank on a chair, his sad eyes comically round. On the desk was a tumbler charged with cigarettes: Leyston mechanically took and lit one.

'Did you never check his alibi?'

'Well – no, sir! Not beyond a word with his old man. He said young Dave was at home that evening, mending his bike. And you know the old man.'

'Better than he seems to know his grandson.'

Leyston punished his lungs. 'It's a stunner though, sir. Do you reckon Meares saw him?'

'No doubt about it. Nor that his gardener jokes had a foundation.' Gently brooded over his pipe. 'It was David Crag who Virtue was planning to meet, of course. He'd feel he could risk that. He'd got a bite on Meares and was ready for a move to new pastures.'

'Then young Dave turned on him, sir.'

'And Meares must have arrived to see the end of it.' Leyston took a drag. 'There could have been provocation, sir.'

'That's what we have to decide now.' Gently drew deeply and sieved smoke. 'Fix up Mason with a fresh warrant. We'll want David Crag's clothes, any likely blunt instruments and whatever else he may have that he shouldn't.'

'The old boy will create, sir.'

Gently grunted. 'I shall want a word with Mr
Crag too! And meanwhile you can hang Meares out to air and give the WPC a break to powder her nose.'

Leyston stubbed his fag and rose. 'I'll put Meares in the charge room,' he said. 'Anything else, sir?'

Gently nodded. 'In a large glass – beer!'

The sun had reached the interrogation room window and was slanting down one of the cream-washed walls. At Gently's instance they'd fetched Leyston's fan and propped it up on an extra chair. Otherwise the scene was unchanged, except that now David Crag was elbowing the table. The policewoman, fresh-faced from a sluicing, sat waiting for business with a virgin page.

Gently sat; Leyston sat; the constable departed and closed the door. David Crag kept his eyes lowered: he was breathing audibly through his mouth. Somehow he resembled a young, trapped animal, a rabbit aware of the presence of stoats. His fingers were still stained from the raspberries and streaks of red had transferred to his brow.

'Right, David,' Gently said. 'I shall have to ask you some questions.' He administered the caution.

David Crag heard him, but it was impossible to tell if he understood.

‘Now . . . you’d better tell us where you got the watch.’

This, at all events, he was prepared for! He pulled his head up half-defiantly and fixed flinching, warm-brown eyes on Gently.

‘I bought it, didn’t I?’

‘You bought it?’

‘Yes – I bought it from this man! The one what spoke to me up on the Common – I seen him again last night!’

‘Oh. From that man.’

‘Yes – I’m telling you.’ His eyes held steady though his mouth trembled. ‘I met him in the caff, the Wimpy, and he asked me if I didn’t want to buy a wristwatch.’

‘I see,’ Gently said. ‘What was he asking for it?’

David Crag wet his lips. ‘Asked a fiver, didn’t he?
Said he’d got two and he didn’t need this one, so he’d sell it to me for a fiver.’

‘And that seemed to you a bargain.’

‘Well it was, wasn’t it? I mean, it was going all right and all.’

‘It didn’t bother you – buying a gold-cased watch for a fiver?’

‘No – well, I mean I didn’t know nothing about that.’

‘Nor anything else about it?’

‘No, I wouldn’t, would I?’

‘Like who you’d seen wearing it a few days ago?’

David Crag took a swallow. ‘I just hadn’t never seen it, not till this man pulled it out in the Wimpy!’

He kept his eyes desperately on Gently’s but the eyes were becoming progressively wider. The fair hair was tousled about them and the cheeks a muck of sweat. Gently considered him silently. The eyes began to roll. Suddenly Crag snatched them away. His breath was coming rough and in starts: more like an animal’s than ever.

‘It won’t do . . . will it?’

‘Look, it’s right what I’m telling you!’

Gently shook his head. ‘We’ve heard it too often.’

‘There was this man—’

‘There wasn’t any man. You remembered too much about him for him to have been real.’

David Crag gave a whine. ‘You ain’t calling me a liar . . . !’ He doubled his fists into his eyes. ‘I ain’t a liar – you ask my grandad – I haven’t never told no lies!’

‘Perhaps you aren’t a cry-baby, either.’

‘You ain’t treating me fair!’ David Crag blubbered. ‘I never wanted that watch anyway – I was going to have one give me for my birthday.’

‘So why did you take it?’

‘I never took it. I bought it off the bloke, like I said.’

‘An eight-hundred-and-fifty-pound watch for a fiver?’

‘I only give him what he asked!’

Now he was blubbering in good earnest, tears vying with sweat on his freckled face. You might have taken him for ten or twelve instead of his seventeen or eighteen years. Gently waited patiently. The blubbering became intermittent, lost its conviction, stopped. Red-eyed, his mouth drooped for fresh sobs, he came out from behind his doubled fists.

‘So now you’ve got that off your chest, why not tell us what really happened?’

David Crag's mouth crumpled. 'You ain't being fair! You tell me I haven't got to say nothing, anyway.'

'No, you needn't, Gently said. 'You can leave us to form our own opinion.'

David Crag snuffled some more and used the sleeve of the bush-shirt. 'He – he give it to me,' he said.

'Who gave it to you?' Gently eased himself on the hard-bottomed interrogation-room chair, aligned his hands and sighted over them at the melting David Crag.

'Him . . . Virtue.'

'Virtue gave you his watch?'

'Ah. He give it to me.'

Gently grunted. 'That's likely, isn't it! That he'd give you a watch worth as much as that.'

'But he did!' The reddened eyes were indignant.

'He give it to me last Monday. Down in the summerhouse, it was. He pulled it off and give it to me.'

'Eight hundred-odd pounds worth of watch.'

'He didn't know it was worth all that.'

'And you thought it was brass.'

'Well . . . no. I reckoned it might be worth twenty quid.'

Gently gazed across his fingers. Now the young gardener's mouth wasn't trembling. Hot-faced among his dishevelled hair, he was pouting childishly, eyes lowered.

'What did you have to do for it?'

'Didn't have to do nothing, did I?'

Gently clicked his disgust. 'We're never going to believe that! Try me again with something more credible.'

David Crag's hot face grew hotter. 'Well . . . I never did it anyway, did I?'

'Didn't you?'

'No I never! I wasn't going to either, for all his old soap.'

'But you must have promised something.'

'I tell you I didn't.'

'Not for a present like that watch?'

David Crag jammed his fists together and sat boring one into the other.

'Let me help you,' Gently said. 'This is what you promised. You promised to meet him on Tuesday evening. He told you to be at the cottage at about nine, and that he'd fix it so that Mr Hozeley wouldn't be there. He'd expect that at least in exchange for his watch – even if he didn't know its value.'

David Crag mauled his fists.

'Well?'

'He gave me the watch – he did!'

'And you agreed to meet him at the cottage.'

He began to snuffle again.

'So,' Gently said. 'You'd have to work it somehow so that your grandfather didn't find out.'

David Crag's eyes had a hunted look. 'You leave my grandad out of this.'

Gently shook his head deliberately. 'Your grandfather will tell me the truth,' he said. 'He may not want to, but he will. It isn't worth your while to lie.'

‘Grandad don’t know nothing about it.’

‘He said you were at home mending your bike.’

‘That’s where I was!’

‘That’s what you told him – and what he believed.
But you weren’t there.’

David Crag blubbered. His sobs had the whining note of a small child – somewhere, a mother should have heard and set him on her knee to comfort him. It made the policewoman fidget uneasily and sink her head over her pad.

‘I can guess how he worked it, sir,’ Leyston said. ‘They’ve got long gardens at those cottages. Crags have a shed at the bottom of theirs, and that’s where sonny would keep his bike. So he’d tell his old man he was off down there, and likely the old boy would never check. Sonny could have left his transistor playing. It’s straight out of the garden on to the Common.’

‘Straight out to the Common.’

Leyston nodded. ‘That’d be the way he goes to work.’

‘He give me the watch,’ David Crag sobbed. ‘He did – he did!’

Leyston stared at him with empty eyes.

Gently spread his hands. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘We’ll take that as read. You had an alibi with your grandfather and a safe route to the cottage.’

‘I didn’t go nowhere!’

‘What time did you leave?’

David Crag whined and cuffed his face. ‘I never saw him, and that’s straight. Not since the time in the summer house.’

‘Still . . . when did you leave?’

‘It ain’t like you think. I never had no transistor down there.’

Gently said nothing.

David Crag swallowed. ‘Reckon it might have been half-past eight.’

‘You went over the Common.’

He pouted. ‘Yes.’

‘Who did you meet on the way?’

‘I didn’t meet nobody, did I? That was about closing-in time.’

‘Go on.’

‘Well that’s it, then. I went to the cottage and never saw him.’ His eyes avoided Gently’s. ‘He wasn’t there, like. Not when he said he was going to be.’

‘When did he say he’d be there?’

‘Said he’d be there after nine.’

‘Where were you to wait for him?’

‘Well . . . at the cottage. I couldn’t very well go inside.’

‘And?’

He rasped his lips. ‘Then I waited a bit, didn’t I?
Down the garden . . . in the summer house, like. I waited a bit. Then I went home.’

‘Having seen nobody.’

‘No, I’m telling you.’

‘You were never nearer to the cottage than the summer house.’

David Crag gulped. ‘No. I wasn’t.’

Gently gazed at him. And shook his head.

David Crag covered up again: but by now he’d almost expended his stock of tears.

His sobbing had struck an unconvincing falsetto, a sort of dry, girlish whimper. Nobody interrupted him; he was left to play out the act solo. At last he ended on a wailing moan and let his fists drop from his eyes.

'I ain't going to say no more . . . !'

That didn't get a response, either. Helplessly he sat with rubbed eyes staring and breath coming in snatched gasps.

'Let's take it from when you arrived at the cottage.'

'No!' The hunted expression was back.

'It was beginning to get dark, wasn't it . . . and of course, there weren't any lights in the cottage.'

'I ain't saying nothing!'

'Virtue hadn't returned. It was probably a little before nine. You'd have gone up through the garden, wouldn't you, and round to the front? To the gate.'

'No I never!'

'And there you'd have waited . . . for somewhere around twenty-five minutes. Time for you to do a bit of thinking – if you hadn't done it before.'

'But I wasn't never round there . . . !'

Gently leaned across the table, his eyes trapping David Crag's eyes. 'And you were thinking like this: that you'd be a mug if you carried on and did what he wanted. Because you didn't have that watch yet. You weren't going to get it till you'd delivered. And knowing Virtue, that would probably be never. The watch was just a carrot to con a yokel.'

'But he'd give it to me – he had!'

'He'd given you nothing and never would have. And you had time to think it over, waiting for him there at the gate. He was playing you for a mug, but you weren't such a mug as all that. So you were going to get even with him. You were going to thump him – there's no risk in thumping queers, is there?'

David Crag's mouth was sagging lower than ever and his eyes had lost focus. He was taking great gulps of breath and grinding his calloused hands together.

'Oh . . . no!'

'Oh yes. Because that's the way it happened, wasn't it? You fetched a handy tool from the tool shed, waited behind the laurel bush, then let him have it. Only Virtue wasn't so easy. He dodged away and picked up that flint. He could have killed you – most likely would have done – and so you had to put him down. And when he was down, there it was – the watch he had tempted you with in the first place. He deserved to lose it. You whipped it off him and hurried back down again to your bike shed.'

'I didn't . . . I never . . .'

'You were found with the watch.'

'I keep telling you . . . he give it to me!'

'And we don't believe you.'

'Oh, my Lord.' He crammed his fist in his mouth and whined.

'Why not get it over?' Gently said quietly.

David Crag bit the fist and moaned. His eyes were glazed and half-closed, with tears squeezing from the corners. But he pulled himself together for a last try.

'There was someone else . . . up at the cottage.'

‘We know that,’ Gently said. ‘Mr Meares was there. He saw what happened.’

‘I never saw Mr Meares!’

‘Quite likely you didn’t.’

David Crag’s messy eyes had a doubtful expression. He wet his lips and took several swallows, the fist still held close to his mouth.

‘It . . . wasn’t him.’

‘Then who was it?’

‘I couldn’t see proper . . . it was dark.’

‘You’re lying again.’

‘No I ain’t!’ He rocked a little, eyes starting to roll.

‘It was . . . that man.’

‘I want a name.’

‘Him . . . the one I saw before . . .’

‘Either give me a name or forget it.’

His mouth jogged uncontrollably. ‘It . . . was . . . him.’

Then the mouth shut with a snap and David Crag began to slide. It may have been the heat, but they were going down like flies in the interrogation room that morning.

Out in the charge room Meares sat on a bench, staring at a cutie on a pin-up calendar. Seeing Gently he made to rise, but Gently motioned him to stay put. He crossed and sat down beside Meares. Meares regarded him apprehensively.

‘We’ve got young Crag in there,’ Gently said.

‘David . . . ?

‘He was found in possession of the watch.’

‘But . . . that’s impossible!’

‘Is it?’

Meares drew back in consternation.

‘You can’t seriously believe that David did it.’

‘Why can’t we?’ Gently said.

‘Because he wasn’t there.’

‘How would you know that – when you didn’t arrive until the killer had left?’

‘Because – because—!’ Meares floundered. He jerked his face away from Gently’s. ‘What you are saying is quite incredible. There must be some other explanation.’

‘Listen,’ Gently said. ‘David Crag has admitted being there. He denies having seen you there, and now you’re denying having seen him. But you did see someone who wasn’t him, and he claims to have seen someone who wasn’t you. There was a third man at the cottage. And that’s the man I want to talk to.’

‘But I saw nobody.’

‘We’re holding David.’

‘No. You can’t put it on him!’

‘So talk, Mr Meares.’

‘I’ve . . . told you everything.’

‘Then David walks into a cell.’

Meares jumped up in agitation and went to stare hard at the calendar. The cutie, though suffering from a high rate of inflation, continued to smile back unmoved.

‘I can’t – I won’t change my statement.’

‘I’m tired of guessing, Mr Meares.’

‘The position I’m placed in is impossible!’

‘You’ll have to judge how much loyalty is worth.’

‘Look . . . Superintendent.’ He turned appealingly. ‘Can’t you see that no sort of justice would be served . . . ?’

Gently shook his head and stared the look of appeal down.

Meares groaned. He stood in torment, scowling at a rent in the charge room’s lino. His neat hands clenched and unclenched, tightened at last into fists.

‘Then – you must do what you think best!’

‘You won’t give me that man’s name?’

‘No, I won’t.’

‘You may be liable to a charge of accessory after the fact.’

‘Then I’ll be liable to it.’ His chin rose stubbornly.

‘And meanwhile David Crag will stay inside.’

Meares’s mouth jammed in a tight line and he aimed his scowl at the charge room’s light-fixture.

Just then Mason and a DC entered lugging holdalls and a bundle of sticks. They were followed by William Crag also laden with a bag and stick. Crag’s eye fell on Meares. He came to a stand. The two men eyed each other. Meares’s face had suddenly become blank. Crag’s face expressed scorn and a sort of furious satisfaction. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. He turned abruptly to Gently.

‘I’ll need a word with you, old partner.’

‘You seem to be having it,’ Gently said.

‘In private, my man.’

Gently stared. He nodded to the door.

★ ★ ★

The sun was off Leyston’s office again, which was probably worth a few degrees. Another bundle of sticks, Mason’s haul from Meares’s house, lay waiting on the table like some auctioneer’s job lot. William Crag stumped in and threw down his hat. He dropped his bag and stick on the desk. From his pocket he drew a clean white handkerchief and proceeded to pat his face and bald crown.

‘This blessed weather!’

Gently said nothing. He took his seat behind the desk. Crag finished his toilet and put away the handkerchief; though there was a chair, he remained standing.

‘So you’ve been chastising the sinful, have you?’ he said.

Gently shrugged and stayed silent.

‘Ah. And I reckon his tongue has prevailed, do you wouldn’t have laid hands on my boy. Aren’t I right?’

‘You’re right,’ Gently said.

‘Ah.’ Crag’s pebbly eyes gleamed at him. ‘And now you’re putting the boy through it – on account of some rubbishy watch, they tell me.’

‘Virtue’s watch,’ Gently said.

‘What matter whose – you’re saying he stole it.’

‘Are you saying he didn’t?’ Gently asked.

‘Yes – twice over! My boy isn’t a thief.’ He moved closer to the desk. ‘So what did Dave tell you?’

‘Your grandson insists that the watch was a present.’

‘Then you’d better believe him!’ Crag said violently. ‘Dave would never lie about

a thing like that.'

'Though he lies about other things?' Gently said.

Crag's eyes were bitter. 'Well, never you mind!
Dave'll be forgiven, in another place.' He got out the handkerchief again, patted himself and blew his nose. 'He spoke up, did he?'

Gently hunched. 'He told as many lies as came into his head.'

'You weren't over-harsh with him?'

'It isn't my method.'

Crag nodded glumly. 'I reckon not.' He stood gazing for a spell, beamy-eyed, his moon-like face wretched. Then he sighed heavily. 'Well, you can let the boy go now.'

'Let him go . . . ?'

'That's what I said. He never stole that watch, and all.'

'You don't seem to understand Mr Crag.'

'It's you who don't understand, my man.' He levelled a stern stare at Gently and leaned his hands on the desk. 'Dave was never at the cottage,' he said. 'Not when that lot was going on. I laid my stick athwart his stern and sent him hollering home again.' He pointed to his eyes. 'I can still use these. And you'll find the bruise-marks on his behind.'

'You – sent him home?'

'Ah, I did. He wasn't where he could steal no watches. When I was through with Master David there was nothing left but go to bed.' He picked up the stick. 'Here. This is the one you should have been looking for. My old dad's quietening-stick, this is. He was a copper, just like you.'

He handed the stick to Gently. It was an ash stick with a knob that felt unduly heavy. Gently ran his nail across the top of the knob: a silver streak showed. The stick was loaded with lead.

Crag was patting his face again. 'This heat! It's enough to make a parson swear. I reckon the Good Lord has got his back turned, leastways he's busy with other things.'

'What's in the bag?'

'Just a few of my things. You can send the boy's gear back along with him. I've had a word with my sister, that's Nellie, and she's coming in to keep an eye on him.'

He dropped suddenly on a chair. A step sounded outside: Leyston's long face appeared at the door. For a moment he stared at the two men, then quietly withdrew, closing the door. Crag leant elbows on the desk.

'I never meant to harm him, you know,' he said. 'Not above fair and just chastisement, such as the Lord might visit on a sinner. But the Lord was vexed with him and me. The Lord put a stone into his hand. Then I had to guard my head, like my old dad taught me a long time ago.'

'And Meares . . . he caught you at it?'

Crag paused a long time. He shook his head. 'I can't say nothing about Mr Meares, except that perhaps now he's wishing his sins away.'

'You can't – or won't?'

'The same thing, my man, for all you're getting out of me.'

'You may need his testimony.'

'Then I'll want for it. But I shan't ask him for it, and that's flat.'

They stared at each other across the desk, across the loaded stick lying on it.

Crag's eyes were slightly protrusive and grey as the shingle: flinten eyes.

'And . . . the doctor?'

'No, no, old partner!' The eyes took on a gleam.

'Here I am, and I'm your man. But that's all I have to say.'

'It's not enough.'

'It'll have to do.' He rose and picked up his bag.

'And now I reckon it's time you locked me up, do you'll be late for your lunch, my man.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

'SUPERINTENDENT . . . ?'

Tanya Capel's voice had assumed the neutral tones of a trained receptionist and, though faintly, one could catch behind it the evensong of some bird. Gently in fact was lying naked on his bed, having just come out of the bath; a tiny breeze was playing through the window and deliciously drying his damp skin. He mumbled a reply.

'Henry is back, Superintendent. He would like to see you in say – half an hour? If that wouldn't put you out for dinner.'

'It won't put me out.'

'You could have a bite with us.'

'No, but thanks all the same.'

'In half an hour then? It can't be later, because
Henry has a rehearsal at eight.'

He clamped the phone down, stayed prone for a moment, then grudgingly swung his feet to the floor. The breeze was coming from a sea already irradiated by the western sun. Its long seams were articulated and dream-like leagues showed on the horizon. Gilded coasters, no longer silhouettes, were moving like chessmen across a board. Evening again . . . and a sky with some blueness. But what hope dared one draw from that?

He dressed, went down to the Marina and drove the short distance to Capel's house. The Volvo was back, looking dustier than ever, and parked beside it an MGB. The latter also sported a doctor sticker and another that read: Guy's Resident; Virtue's understudy, no doubt. The car was untidy and had a doubtful tyre.

'Henry is in the shower, Superintendent . . .'

Tanya Capel's smile was less warming this evening. She led him down the echoey tiled hall to a room with French doors into the garden. It was furnished as a library. Its tall, varnished oak bookcases were of the period of the house. On a long, matching table, beside a vase of roses, lay a couple of Uffa Fox quartos.

'Can I bring you a beer?'

'Not for the moment.'

'Henry will only be a few minutes.'

She paused briefly then swept out, leaving a faint odour of sandalwood.

Gently shrugged to himself. Outside, the doctor's lawn looked greener than most people's. It was bordered by beds of colourful annuals and by roses denuded of every dead head. A crazy-paved path, bright with rock plants, led to a sundial and a pool, and a square-cut beech hedge hid the kitchen garden and all but the roof of a large greenhouse. A garden where everything grew, everything flowered, kept its place . . . Red Admirals, plentiful that summer, played around the annuals and a rampant buddleia.

‘Ah . . . Gently.’

Through an arch in the beech hedge one could glimpse earthed rows of potatoes, tented frames of runner beans, a wheelbarrow with a hoe leant against it.

‘Sorry to have kept you waiting.’

Also, by the wheelbarrow, a watering can: large and green, with a long, fine spout that ended in a flattened rose.

‘Shouldn’t we sit down?’

From somewhere in the house sounded the clear, chuckling notes of a clarinet. Gently turned to face Capel who had come forward from the door.

Capel’s greying hair was dank and he was buttoning the cuffs of a fresh white shirt. His angular face wore a cautious smile as he shepherded Gently to one of two chairs that faced the French doors. He took the other and, still smiling, finished his business with the cuffs.

‘Are you going to jump on me from a great height?’ Gently stared but said nothing.

‘I’ve been phoning around, you know, since I got back, so there isn’t any bombshell for you to spring on me. But I sense a certain dissatisfaction – as though pinching my gardener hadn’t made you happy.’ He made a wry mouth. ‘To tell you the truth, it hasn’t made me very happy, either.’

Gently’s stare was inflexible. ‘I’ve come for the truth.’

‘Oh now, now!’ Capel smiled. ‘Jesting Pilate and all that. What more can you possibly need to know?’

‘You’ve got my witness and I want him back.’

‘I don’t think I comprehend, old lad.’

‘You comprehend,’ Gently said. ‘I’m asking you to take the gag off Meares.’

‘Well now, well!’ Capel was keeping his smile amused. He tilted his unusual face and eyed Gently a little askew. The notes of the clarinet sounded again, a long trill, falling and rising. Capel’s eyes switched in their direction and he sketched the phrase with his finger.

‘If I could have your attention,’ Gently said.

Capel shrugged. ‘Carry on, dear soul.’

‘Then listen. William Crag has confessed and his confession will stand up in court. It is confirmed by his grandson and by a positive report on his stick from the lab. But Crag won’t go beyond that. He won’t admit the presence of Meares. And Meares agrees that he was present but won’t admit the presence of Crag. Crag chooses not to involve Meares. Meares won’t bear witness against Crag.’

‘Good for Craggy!’ Capel smiled. ‘But how do you know that Leonard *was* a witness?’

‘I know, because you told me.’

‘I!’

‘Yes,’ Gently said, ‘you. Last night you reconstructed the killing exactly as Crag describes it in his statement. You’d talked to an eyewitness – Meares. Meares came to confide to you the morning after. He saw it happen. He told you. You’ve known who the culprit was all along.’

Capel examined his long fingers. ‘I’d be a fool to admit that, wouldn’t I?’ he said. ‘You’d be at my throat with an accessory charge, and Leonard’s too. Isn’t that the game?’

‘But about your gardener you couldn’t care less?’

‘How do you mean – about my gardener?’

Gently grunted. ‘For such an intelligent man you have some amazingly dense moments! If we charge Crag on his confession the charge will be murder with the alternative of manslaughter. If his account is confirmed by a credible witness the charge could be reduced to unlawful killing.’

‘You mean he might get off?’

‘There’s a fighting chance – with the sort of counsel you can afford.’

‘He’s going to have that anyway,’ Capel said slowly. ‘But what about us – me and Leonard?’

Gently stared bleakly. ‘That’s up to Leyston.’

‘You’ll leave it to him – old mutton-chops?’

‘It’s his decision.’

Capel’s smile crept back. ‘I must declare an interest. Leyston’s a patient.’

‘So.’

Capel’s smile became a grin. ‘I think it’s time we had a beer,’ he said. ‘I’ve had a hectic day in committee, and I daresay you’ve been having one, too.’

They drank lager from misted glasses while outside the sun dropped behind the beeches. Quite definitely the sky had a bluer tint, and the sea breeze was stirring the scorched leaves. Down the lawn a wagtail was dipping at the pool. The clarinet had fallen silent. Instead one heard conversation and occasional laughter in another room.

‘I expect you’ve pumped Leonard dry,’ Capel said musingly. ‘He’ll only be sticking at the one point.’

‘We know of his association with Virtue and of Virtue’s attempt to blackmail him.’

Capel drank. ‘Leonard was an idiot. Of course, he should have gone straight to you people. But that, in his case, meant going to Leyston – and Leyston happens to be a customer. Rather off-putting. Then there’s his wife.’ He paused. ‘Have you met Leonard’s wife?’

‘Very briefly.’

‘You may have formed an opinion. Dotty Meares has a destructive personality.’ He took a clinical pull. ‘That’s what’s at the bottom of it, Leonard making himself an ass over Virtue. He’s thick with Laurel, but Laurel was too obvious. Dotty wouldn’t have any suspicions about Virtue.’

‘Meares not being a chronic homosexual.’

‘No more than I am,’ Capel said. ‘There’s a streak in most of us – repressed childhood experiences – but it only surfaces in rare cases. Leonard’s was one of them. He was emotionally obstructed and prepared to accept the female in Virtue. Realization was traumatic, of course. I would pronounce Leonard cured for life.’

‘Did he consult you about that?’

Capel shook his head. ‘Too shamefaced. He told me about it first on Wednesday, to explain what he was doing at the cottage. I suppose it doesn’t matter now, but he was going to give Virtue his deserts, and then brazen it out. Lucky he didn’t – he might have damaged those precious hands.’

‘Instead, his nerves were damaged.’

Capel laughed. ‘He’ll get over that. I’ll have a session with him this evening, and then he’ll be playing like a bird.’ With one hand he mimed the bowing of a cellist.

‘Leonard can play in his sleep, you know.’

‘Tell me what he told you,’ Gently said.

Capel plucked imaginary strings. ‘Skipping the overture and first act, he told me he followed Virtue to the cottage. It was nearly dark and he met nobody. As he turned into the lane he heard voices – angry voices. He recognized Craggy’s citing Sodom and Gomorrah and calling down brimstone. Then he heard the stick whopping and, when he got closer, could see Craggy whacking at Virtue’s backside. That was all bunce as far as Leonard was concerned, so he stayed clear and let Craggy get on with it.’ Capel twanged a single note. ‘Virtue grabbed the flint and screamed that he’d smash in Craggy’s bald head. Craggy dodged a bit, then reversed the stick and let Virtue have it as he was coming in.’

‘And what was Meares doing just then?’

Capel drank slowly, tasting the lager. ‘I should think it happened rather quickly, with old Leonard simply goggling. He’s not a man of violence, you know. It would take him a moment to weigh up what he was seeing.’

‘How many blows were struck with the knob-end?’

‘Just the one. It was enough. Either Virtue had a very thin skull, or there was more in the stick than met the eye.’

Gently drank. ‘It was loaded.’

‘Ah, that accounts for it,’ Capel said, interestedly.

‘Was the skull much damaged?’

‘Left parietal. A medium depressed fracture.’

Capel nodded. ‘Probably a thin skull anyway.’

‘That was noted in the report.’

Capel caressed a few strings. ‘So that was it, then.

One tap was enough to kill. Old Craggy stood thunderstruck when Virtue went down and never moved another muscle.’

‘What did Crag do?’

‘Oh, the usual. Crag isn’t a doctor’s gardener for nothing. He felt for his heart and pulse but found neither. Virtue was gone.’

‘And then Crag took off.’

‘Wouldn’t you have done?’ Capel stared squarely at Gently. ‘No – perhaps you wouldn’t. But you’re a policeman with authority and the law behind you.’ He drank. ‘Yes, Crag took off – and I, for one, don’t blame him. He hadn’t spotted Leonard, which is the reason why he shopped him yesterday without inhibition. Leonard was in shock. He pulled himself together sufficiently to check that the corpse was a corpse, then he departed as fast as old Crag – realizing, of course, that he was Number One suspect.’

Gently nodded. ‘And later came and told you.’

‘Well, he could scarcely discuss it with his wife!’

‘He asked your advice.’

Capel gestured with his glass. ‘I have known Leonard for a very long time. We talked it out. He was quite frank. It was plain that Crag hadn’t meant to kill Virtue. And it was plain that Leonard would be in big trouble if he reported what he’d seen, and had to account for being there. Meanwhile, I didn’t want to lose a good gardener or jeopardise the performance of the *Quintet*, so my advice to him was what you’d expect: clam up and keep a low profile. It was done and could not be undone. What he had to do was to limit the consequences.’

Gently drank. ‘And the result of your advice is that Meares has been partly destroyed.’

‘Oh, come on now!’ Capel smiled. ‘Old Leonard knows how to take a punch.’

Gently stared at the garden. ‘Meares has been interrogated. His will has been systematically broken. His personality has been disorientated. He will never be quite the same person again. And he will blame you. If you’d let him tell the truth he might have rolled with the punch and stayed intact.’

‘You don’t know Leonard,’ Capel smiled.

‘Better than you,’ Gently said.

‘Well, you don’t know something else,’ Capel smiled. ‘Today Leonard’s wife upped and left him.’

Gently went still. ‘When was this . . . ?’

‘While you were still busy with his personality. The Virtue bit did the job. Dotty is suing for a divorce.’ His eyes glimmered. ‘That’s a counter-jolt. You knocked him one way, she’s knocked him another. His personality will be disorientated all right, but nothing I and my niece can’t handle.’

Gently stared at his glass before drinking. ‘And you still think he’ll play for you tomorrow?’

‘Like a bird,’ Capel said. ‘Tanya’s had a word with him. The old boy is rocking, but he’s lucid. He’s in a whirl. He needs us, the performance, like a drowning man needs his straw. We’ve rehearsals right through, beginning tonight, and I’ll be talking to him by the yard.’ He checked. ‘You won’t need him tomorrow, will you?’

‘Naturally we shall need an amended statement.’

‘But not tomorrow!’ Capel rocked his shoulders. ‘We’ve *got* to keep him on a cloud till Sunday.’

‘After which he can go to pieces?’ Gently said.

‘Well, of course, there’s going to be a reaction.
But it’ll be all the better for him if it’s delayed and he’s got the performance under his belt.’

Gently nodded to his glass. He tipped and drained it. Somebody coughed in the other room; then came the squeak of the clarinet, followed by laughter from Tanya Capel.

‘It’s the performance that’s always mattered . . . isn’t it?’

‘Didn’t I tell you that from the start?’ Capel hitched forward eagerly and brandished his empty glass at Gently. ‘When the chips are down we’re all expendable – Virtue, Craggy, even Walt. We have our entrances and exits but music is for ever. Music is life, and sanity. My goodness, we need it in our world. Music is hope. While we keep creating it civilization has a chance.’

‘And with those laudable principles in view you were prepared to keep me guessing.’

Capel sat back, grinning. ‘Well, I was prepared to have a try!’

‘As for example last night.’

‘Yes – last night.’ He gave the glass a delicate ting. ‘What you don’t know is that Craggy suffered remorse after he’d blown the gaff to you about Leonard. He came to tell me, and incidentally made a clean breast while he was at it. So I had chapter and verse for my reconstruction. What Leonard didn’t tell me, Craggy did.’

‘And of course, you advised him to keep his mouth shut.’

Capel made a face. ‘With my principles in view! And I have to admit it, I rather

relished the prospect of playing a poker game with you.'

'To the extent of slandering your charming wife?'

'Hush!' Capel mimed a guilty look over his shoulder. 'There are some things one doesn't tell the women – not even tolerant girls like Tanya.'

Gently meditated on his glass, which had a sandblast frieze of dancing nymphs. Capel watched him with alert eyes; he was sitting drooped now, hands trailed.

'With regard to Meares's statement . . .'

Capel said nothing. He kept his grey-hazel eyes on Gently.

'I was assigned to the case by an assistant commissioner who likes his taste for the arts to be known. My unwritten brief was to lean over backwards to get Hozeley off the hook.' Gently shrugged. 'There'd be small point in that if by doing so I prevented his latest production. I daresay the assistant commissioner would give his approval to some little adjustment of routine.'

'You beauty!' Capel grinned. 'Then Leonard can stay on his cloud?'

'Tell him to call at the station on Monday. You may indicate to him that the pressure is off.'

'Just leave it to me.' Capel jumped up. 'This means that you'll be staying over the weekend?'

'Perhaps.'

'Then here's something for you that love may buy, but money can't.'

He went to a bureau and returned with a pink paste-board ticket. He handed it to Gently: it was a ticket for the morrow-night's performance.

'You'll be next to Tanya if that's all right – Leslie couldn't get away.' Capel frowned. 'Ideally, of course, I ought to invite you to tonight's rehearsal. But I'm afraid you are *persona non grata* with Leonard and one or two other people.'

Gently grimaced. 'A vocational hazard. And I'd sooner hear the *Quintet* in its proper setting.'

'That will be best. Meanwhile I'll harangue them on the impersonality of police interrogators.'

Gently rose and went to the French doors. Scent of stocks and roses wafted to him. The sun was quite off the garden now and was reddening only the tops of the beeches. In the air was a definite softness, in the sky a definite blue. Capel, who'd come to stand by him, sniffed the air with expanded nostrils.

'You know . . . at this stage of the game . . . one hardly likes to risk a forecast. But could it be?'

Gently grunted. 'Does the council know about your lawn?'

And the rain came. First, as smoke-mist, whipped across the sky like dust. Then, as a pale nimbus, falling with no more weight than dew. Then, as darkness. Then, as drizzle, trying to wet the derisive earth. Then, as a Wagnerian voice and a flash of swords and a beating roar more loud than surf. Branches crashed; the pale earth blackened; streams appeared, drowning roads and streets. Cars crept to a halt to move no more and struggling figures vanished into doorways. Lights failed. Down at the harbour, not a yacht had a dry bunk. The telephone failed. A wall collapsed, blocking the road out to Saxton. And the rain flew and flew, the rain hissed on tile and tarmac, the rain bore down fences and trees and built up swashes of sand and mud. All evening it raged and into the night. In minutes it had done what armies could not. Black ash along the heath gushed plumes of white steam, fought on for moments,

then died for ever. The fires were out, the funeral smoke banished, and in a corner of calm, the music played.

So the drought was broken, though according to the experts it was due to return directly. It never did. An expert is a man who knows too much about too little.